

BEAUTY OF THE BEAST #1 THE MYSTIC ROSE

PART I

THE FLOWER, THE SWORD, AND THE KISS

KRISTIE LYNN HIGGINS

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The Mystic Rose: Part A
The Flower, The Sword, And The Kiss

Kristie Lynn Higgins
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The Monastery of San Michele, Italy painting created by Carlo Bossoli

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Prologue

A Bit of History

On the planet Terra when recorded history began, Man coexisted with the Necroms. Necroms were intelligent cat-like humanoids. The dawn of this period was known as the First Age of Magic. In the Second Age of Magic, a war broke out between Man and the Necroms and by the middle of the Second Age, Man was nearly wiped from creation. Those who survived fled Wellspring and journeyed across the sea into the unknown, finding new homes and creating fortified domains. In the Third and final Age of Magic, Man established five island kingdoms: Commery, Fletching, Morgog, Swelldom, and Hort. In the First Age of Metal, Man turned from the lost art of magic to the might of weapons as they discovered iron then steel. Large armies were created, and Man fought amongst themselves, forgetting the Necroms into myth. For generations, the wars continued until an arranged marriage between the two strongest kingdoms of Commery and Morgog ceased the bloodshed, and so Man established the first Emperor and Empress and the tradition of Amalgamation. When both the Emperor and Empress of the Five Kingdoms died, the two strongest kingdoms' heirs married and crowned a new dynasty and so began the Age of Amalgamation.

Chapter One

The Beast

"Stand your guard!" Han shouted as he held a wooden sword, taking an attack position against a boy. The commander's red cape draped his left shoulder, and he had short black hair and a trimmed beard. He told the boy, "I shall attack first." Blue-gray hills surrounded them as a cool crisp breeze swept through the tall grass. The multitude of knee-high blades rippled like waves across an ocean. Edward drew his wooden sword, taking a defensive position. He stood by a large Cobalt Oak in the land of Naught. The silver-blue tree shaded them as a Crimson Jay chirped to the new sun's cycle. Edward said, "I am ready, High Guard." Five more High Guards surrounded a carriage and watched the fight. They cheered on the boy prince as a carriage driver tended to four horses. The steeds needed water before the last stretch of their journey back to the Fletching Kingdom. The journey to anoint the Prince a potential Emperor was over. A little girl with an open book watched the practice duel. "Quiz me," she pleaded to one of the guards. Von took the book, asking, "What is a nal?" She smiled, smoothed her hands down her plain brown dress, and then answered, "A nal is a measure of time. There are twenty in a day. It's what we call a sun's cycle." "Good..." Von replied as he glanced up and noticed Han was ready to begin, so he hurried the next question by asking, "What is a mite?" She giggled and then answered, "A nal consists of a hundred mites, and it also measures time." She beamed with pride, knowing the next fact as she said, "There are two thousand mites in a sun's cycle." "Well done," Von said. "What is a zoc?" "It measures distance. A horse can run a zoc in six mites." "Good, good..." he said as he handed the book back, turning his full attention to the Prince and commander. "Let us watch the duel." Han thrust his small wooden sword, and Edward blocked. "Excellent," the commander told Edward. "Now we need to work on countering." Han repeated the attack, and Edward blocked and thrust toward the High Guard's belly. Han blocked and stripped the Prince of his sword, and the weapon fell near the carriage. "Never believe you have the upper hand," Han told him as his face hardened for the sake of the lesson. Edward was so much like his father the King. He was so arrogant and fallibly confident. He wasn't cruel but self-centered. The commander hoped his future King would be a good ruler and one with a heart for the people. Han stated, "Let up your guard in the least and your enemy shall take advantage." The Prince bowed his head, defeated. He hated losing. Edward spoke, "I do not see why I have to practice the sword." Han sighed and then said, "You must learn to defend yourself, my lord." He leveled his blade on the Prince as he added, "You must be able to protect yourself." The little girl gasped, dropped her book, ran to Edward's sword, and picked it up. She ran behind Han, jumped on his back, and placed the wooden blade next to his neck, and then the girl declared, "Not as long as there are High Guards to protect him." Han laughed, and then he questioned her, "So little one, are you a High Guard?" "Yes," she answered. He grabbed the sword and rolled her off his back into his arms. Edward kicked the dirt jealous that Han's attention was on the girl, and then he said, "Girls cannot be High Guards. Girls are not allowed to handle weapons." Han put the child down and looked her over, and then he told her, "You know the Prince is right, little one. What is your name?" She admired the man towering over her as she answered him, "I've only been called girl. I'm..." "The peasant was never given a name," Edward

interrupted, looking down on the girl. "Her mother died when she was born, she has no father, and so has no name. My mother the Queen took pity on her and made her my playmate." Han rubbed his black beard, examining her, and then he questioned, "You are what, eight?" "Nine," she replied. "Two seasons younger than the Prince." "Why have you not picked yourself a name?" the commander questioned. She batted her big brown eyes as she replied, "I don't know what to call myself. I was also told only someone from the court can name me." Han glanced over those gathered, focused on one of his men who was an Archer, and grinned. He questioned her, "How about Pluck?" "Pluck?" she repeated. "Pluck is not a girl's name," Edward stated as he sneered, wondering why the commander never picked a name for him. He was the Prince and was far more worthy to receive a name. Edward said, "Anyway, is that not the heart, liver, and lungs of a slaughtered animal? Why not call her Entrails?" Han frowned, shaking his head as he spoke, "Never mind the Prince. He can be spiteful when he loses a duel." The commander turned his gaze back to the girl. A name was very important. It identified who you were, who you could be and once given, no one could take it away. Han told her, "Pluck also means resourceful courage and daring in the face of adversity." She smiled as she said, "I like Pluck." She delighted in how the word rolled off her tongue and that it was something that belonged to her. "But Pluck is not a girl's name," Edward insisted, stomping his foot. "It is not proper." "True... True..." Han spoke as he looked at the girl. The Prince was right... the name wouldn't be accepted in the Fletching Court. Han suggested, "Perhaps I should pick another." "No. I like it," she said as she pleaded with her small hands, fearing he would take it away before it was hers. "Really, I like Pluck. Please, let me keep it. Something that's mine." Han's face softened. The poor child, to have nothing in this world, not even a name. He raised his wooden sword, tapped her on each shoulder as if knighting her, and said, "Pluck it is." Edward rolled his blue eyes as he asked, "How much longer until we leave?" Han looked at the carriage driver. The driver replied, "If we're to ride nonstop to the castle, the horses should rest a few more nals." "We shall wait a few more nals," Han stated and scanned the prairie, and then he questioned, "Why don't you play, my lord? It isn't every sun's cycle you're allowed beyond the walls of your castle." Edward's pout vanished as he started, "Well..." He looked over the blue-gray hills and saw a forest in the distance as a mischievous grin crossed his face. "I could busy myself for a nal or two." "Good then. Stay where we can see you and don't go into the forest," Han instructed him, then turned to his men, and ordered, "Bulwark and Von, keep an eye on the children. The rest of us shall ride ahead to the village and pick up our supper. We shall be back within the nal." "Yes sir," Bulwark and Von replied. "This way," Edward commanded the girl as he scurried through the tall blue-gray grass as if chasing something. "I saw a Prairie Toad. Let us see if we can catch it." "Where?" Pluck asked as she ran after him, carrying the Prince's wooden sword. "I don't see a toad." "There!" Edward shouted as he pointed at the imaginary amphibian. He needed to get them closer to the forest and then wait until the High Guards were not looking. He glanced at the girl. All he had to do was convince her to follow him. He smirked. She was very devoted to him. It might not be as hard as he believed. He told her, "The toad is heading into the forest." She stopped and shook her head as she insisted, "We can't. Han said we're not to go in." Edward also stopped and spoke, "He did, but who is the Prince?" He raised his chin, pausing and then said, "Anyway..." A sly grin crossed his face before he stated, "I shall need a High Guard to accompany me." Pluck's face brightened as she pointed to herself and questioned, "You mean me?" She motioned back the way they came and asked, "But what about Bulwark and Von?" The children looked across the prairie to

the warriors. The two High Guards were distracted by a traveler asking directions. "We shall not be gone long. They shall not even know we are missing so come," Edward commanded her as he headed into the forest. "It shall be an adventure like those told in stories." "I don't know," she said as she followed him, searching the trees. "What if Necroms live here?" "Necroms..." He laughed and then explained to her, "They are only stories told to scare little children." "I am a child..." Pluck stated as she apprehensively scanned the forest, gripping the sword tightly. "I am scared." She bit her lip, not wanting to go but did, desperate to protect the Prince no matter how frightened she was. Pluck said, "There are reasons children shouldn't go into dark woods." Summer green shrouded the forest as Black Feathered Yaws sang to the new sun's cycle. Their high pitched shrills echoed across the forest as pine scented the air. Trunk Beetles buzzed about the children as Edward led them down an animal trail. The canopy thickened the further they ventured. The woods darkened as the sun found little passage into the forest domain, and the air grew cool. "We better go back," Pluck suggested as she searched the shadows for monsters as misshapen trees frightened her. "Are you afraid?" Edward questioned as his heart pounded for the excitement, knowing nothing would turn him back. "Yes," she admitted. "Please, let's return." "A little farther then we shall. Look..." He pointed to a structure hidden in the vegetation and asked, "What could it be?" "A temple? Maybe..." Pluck replied as she saw statues of a Woolly Tiger, Fire Lion, Striped Cheetah, and Ghost Panther guarding the overgrown entrance. Their cold stone eyes glared at them and warned them not to enter as she stated, "I don't think we should go in." "Nonsense. There is nothing to be afraid of. There is no one else out here." "That's why I'm afraid," she admitted as her little hands trembled. Pluck readied the wooden sword as she said, "I'm the only one here to protect you." In the distance, Bulwark and Von shouted, "My lord... Prince Edward..." Their cries were frantic as they questioned, "Where are you?" Pluck started to shout. "No," Edward commanded, staring at the temple that beckoned him. "I am not done with my adventure. They shall find us when they do. Come." "I think we should let them know where we are." Edward turned to her, and his piercing blue eyes stared at her as he asked her, "Do you love me?" "What did you say?" she asked. His question surprised her. "Do you love me?" he repeated. "Yes, I have always—" "Then come with me," Edward interrupted, feeling nothing for her. She was an object. The girl was something to own and something to rule. He attacked her heart. It was the one muscle vulnerable to words... to lies... A simple gesture from him and then a smile, and she was his. His mother had taught him well. He told her, "If you love me, you shall do as I say." Pluck didn't answer him only nodded. Edward rushed into the structure and followed a long pale-white hallway. Brass torches lit the stone passage that looked as if it hadn't been used in a very long time. "Someone is here," she said. Everything within Pluck told her to run and flee from this place. She told him, "Someone had to light the fires." "Let us see," Edward said as he steadied himself on a cold stone wall determined to continue. The temple had to protect something, and he had to know what it was. Edward told the girl, "This is my kingdom and anyone here is my subject." Pluck bit her lip again, and then she said, "That doesn't mean they'll obey you." The hall opened to a large room with a round blue pool. Steam hovered above the water like a phantom mist. A bush grew from a platform in the middle of the water and on it, a single white flower budded. Edward's eyes widened as he uttered, "A Mystic Rose!" "A what?" Pluck inquired and when she saw it, the flower's beauty awed her. "A Mystic Rose. It is written they possess great power," Edward spoke as he licked his lips greedily and deeply breathed, smelling the flower's sweet aroma. "It is said

that the Mystic Rose was the only magical thing brought to the Fletching Kingdom." He rubbed his palms as he stated, "I must have it." "Maybe you shouldn't. It belongs to someone," Pluck insisted as she noticed more statues of large cats encircling the room just like the ones outside of the temple. Fear clung to her words as she said, "Please, let's leave." "I am the Prince. What I want I possess," Edward declared as he crossed stone steps to the bush. Glittering sparkles surrounded the Mystic Rose like fluttering pixies. He carefully grabbed the stem of the white rose, broke it from the bush, and then waited a couple of moments to see if anything would happen. Nothing did, so Edward headed back as he said, "See... No one is here... Now let us return." Pluck looked around as she held her breath, and then she sighed and studied the white bud as she asked, "May I touch the Mystic Rose?" He thought on her request, and then he replied, "You may but only once." She touched the white petals of the Mystic Rose with her left hand and slid her index finger down its stem. "That is enough," Edward spoke as he pulled it away. "Ouch..." Pluck said as she put her finger to her mouth. "The flower bit me." "Huh?" He examined the stem, and then he told her, "It did not bite you. You caught your finger on a thorn. See..." Edward showed her as he said, "There is a little blood here." The thorn absorbed the blood as she peered at it. The Mystic Rose's petals changed from white to blue. Pluck smiled and giggled, and the bud's petals turned yellow. "How pretty," Pluck uttered as she looked at her index finger. She was surprised to see silver, blue, and green sparkles materialize over her finger as if it was a magic wand. The multicolor lights danced about like fairies, and a black dot appeared on her fingertip. Two black lines shot from the circle and split, curving around to the top. The lines joined and created four separate rings up to her knuckle, and then the sparkles faded. Pluck questioned, "Is this magic?" "No..." Edward answered her, and then he stated, "It looks like a tattoo. Do you not know magic happens only for those with Royal Blood?" He examined the markings she received from his prize. No peasant would receive the power of his Mystic Rose. He told her, "The Queen shall not like that you have a tattoo." Her face reddened with embarrassment and fear, dreading the Queen's wrath, and then she said, "It's your fault I have it. You're the one who stuck me with the thorn." "My fault?" he questioned, and then he told her, "Do not blame this on me." Pluck pouted as she said, "I am and I'm going to tell the Queen." "My mother!" Edward uttered as he cringed. "You cannot. I command you not to." Her face grew stern as she spoke, "You'll have to do better than that." Her disobedience outraged him as he questioned her, "What did you say?" She folded her arms and then replied, "I want something for my silence." "Give you something, hah!" He looked at the yellow bud and told her, "I shall not give you the Mystic Rose." Pluck laughed as she said, "I don't want it. I want something else." "What else could you want?" Edward questioned as he looked around the room as if it would be there. She blushed before whispering, "The Kiss." The Mystic Rose's petals changed to pink. Edward's face flushed as he uttered, "My first kiss but that is for my betrothed." He looked her over like she was rabble before he told her, "Anyway, you are not royalty." "That's true, but the Kiss only pledges your heart to the one," Pluck said as she giggled. "Not that you'll marry me. I know you can't marry a peasant." She fiddled with the wooden sword as she stated, "This is all I want." He thought on her proposal. The Kiss was meaningless to him. If it shall buy her silence... He answered, "Agreed. I shall give you my first kiss and in exchange, you shall not tell my mother it is my fault you have the tattoo." He then added, "Or that I gave you the Kiss." "I agree," she said as she blushed again coyly. "I'll ready myself." Pluck placed her hands behind her back and puckered her lips. Edward took a deep breath, gathered his courage, and leaned toward her lips ready to meet them. Before

they kissed, a howling wind whipped in, chilled the air, and flickered the fires lighting the room. The docile stone faces of the statues magically became angry, and the children heard large cats rage. The Mystic Rose's hue became purple as fear filled Pluck. "Who dares?" a woman's voice demanded like the roar of a lioness. "Who dares steal the Mystic Rose?" A woman fair as an Angel Dove soared into the room like a white apparition. She pointed a slender finger at the Prince as she questioned him, "Is it, ye?" Both children paled. "Speak up child!" the woman demanded. "Is it, ye?" Edward looked at Pluck, and then he stepped forward and replied, "Yes. I took the Mystic Rose." His fear turned to anger as he declared, "This is my kingdom. I shall take what I want." "Curse ye, arrogant one!" she shrieked. "Ye shall regret the sun's cycle ye transgressed this temple." She floated above them as she questioned them, "Do ye not know I am Fairah, Protector of the Mystic Rose? Curse ye! If ye had only asked, the Mystic Rose would have been ye's." Fairah hovered to the ceiling as green currents of electricity surged across her body. Her long white hair stood on end as power flowed through her otherworldly form as she yelled, "Ye do not deserve the Mystic Rose!" "My prince," a voice shouted from outside the structure. "Han, here!" Edward replied, hoping his guards would save him. "I am in danger!" Fairah raised her hands and formed a ball of electricity in her palms as her solid white eyes glowed green. She told him, "They shall not reach ye in time." She flung the energy, and the ball hurled toward him. Pluck's heart skipped, seeing Edward in danger, and she shouted, "My lord!" She rushed toward him and pushed the Prince out of the way as she yelled, "Look out!" Edward landed on the stone floor and rolled to face Pluck as the energy hit her, throwing her back, but she didn't fall. The power lifted her into the air like a great wind. She screamed as green electricity surged through her tiny body, whipping her brown hair about. Roars of Woolly Tigers, Fire Lions, Striped Cheetahs, and Ghost Panthers filled the room with unbearable noise. Edward covered his ears. Turquoise energy exploded from Pluck and blew the Prince's black hair. The power shredded her dress, ripping it from her body, and she covered her nakedness with her arms and knees. "I'm burning!" Pluck shrieked, reaching her hand toward the Prince. "Save me!" Paralyzed by fear, Edward shook his head as he covered his eyes with his hands and screamed, "Make it stop! Han, save me!" Short beige fur sprouted from Pluck's body as a long tail formed. Tiger like claws replaced her nails, and her canine teeth lengthened. Pluck screamed again, but she sounded like a Ghost Panther, and her hair changed to fiery-crimson and grew longer into a full mane. Her eyes changed from brown to emerald green, and her legs grew, becoming more cheetah like. The power lowered Pluck's small frame to the floor. She wept, wrapping her furry arms around her ill-fated form and shivered as tears streamed down her face. Edward scurried away from the ghastly sight and made Pluck cry all the more. Han, Bulwark, Von, and the rest of the High Guards rushed in with their rapier swords readied. Bulwark and Von hurried to the Prince and carried him out of the temple as Han rushed toward Pluck and then he halted. "By Fletching! What beast is this?" He lifted his sword to strike her as he yelled, "Crell spawn!" "Do not hurt the child," Fairah commanded. "She is only cursed." "She..?" Han lowered his sword, examining the beast more closely as he inquired, "Is that you, little one?" Pluck turned to him, furry beige face wet with tears and quivered out an answer, "Yes." Han pointed his slender sword at the apparition and asked, "Is it a fight you want, witch?" "No," Fairah replied, and then she told him, "My duty is over. Ye may leave in peace." Han turned to the men who were still with him and ordered them, "All of you out." They did as commanded. He removed his red cape and covered Pluck, and then he ordered the phantom woman, "Change her back." His request surprised Fairah, and she

told him, "I cannot as I said... there is a spell on her." "Why did you do this to her?" he demanded. "Why this hideous form?" "The punishment was meant for the boy, but she pushed him out of the way." "But why?" Han repeated. Fairah couldn't understand why this man didn't know. All of Fletching should know. Fairah answered him, "He stole the Mystic Rose which I am the protector of." She motioned to the bush in the center of the pool and said, "They should have known better." "Known?" Han snapped, and then he questioned, "Who are you?" Again he surprised her as she asked, "Ye do not know me? I am Fairah and this last place of magic has been protected by the king's decree since the foundation of the Kingdom." "My dear lady, I am Han, Commander of the High Guards," he said as he swiped his sword, pointing to the room. "I have not heard that this land is protected. You must have been forgotten by the passing of time." "Forgotten?" Fairah uttered as she contemplated the possibility. "Then the boy knew not to take the Mystic Rose or that in asking he could have had it." Han nodded. "So I punished him for only being an arrogant child." Fairah looked at Pluck with compassion as she restated, "Or should I say, I condemned her." Han demanded, "Take back the hex." She explained to him, "Even with my powers, I cannot but..." Fairah floated down next to the girl as she said, "There is a way." She waved her hand over the child and spoke, "If she can receive what was promised this sun's cycle before the Mystic Rose, the curse shall be broken." She lifted into the air as her spectral form started to vanish. "Where are you going?" he demanded. She paused mid-air and told him, "There is nothing more for me to guard here until another Mystic Rose blooms." "What about the child?" Han asked as he felt helpless to comfort Pluck yet alone help her through this tragedy. "I cannot take her back to the castle like this. Since our birth, we are told to fear Necroms. We are to despise and kill any we might come across. Look at her." He turned Pluck to face Fairah, and then he continued, "She is the very embodiment of what we hate. I understand, but the others shall not. They shall throw her in the dungeon or kill her." Fairah shook her head with disdain as she said, "Is this how they praise heroes now?" She looked around the temple and then replied, "The child may live here. Few people venture into these woods, so she should be safe." Fairah looked once more to the girl as the tragedy of what sort of life she cursed her to become clearer in her mind, and then Fairah vanished without another word. "No," Pluck pleaded, turning to the High Guard. "Don't leave me here, not alone." Han felt for the girl. Her life had been hard enough, but now with the curse... Han told her, "I am sorry, but you can't return with us. They shall not understand. Too many in the court still fear the myth of the Necroms." He left and returned, placing on the floor the supplies they purchased in town. "Here is some food," he stated, and then he started out. "No! Don't leave me." Pluck grabbed his leg as she begged him, "I don't want to be alone." Han's heart broke as he placed his hand on her furry head, and then he told her, "I vow as a High Guard I shall return tomorrow." He beckoned to her so she would look at him, "Little one..." She lifted her feline eyes. "You sacrificed yourself to save the Prince, a duty that was ours. I shall not let you be forgotten like the protector of this temple," Han told her as he helped her onto her new legs, not knowing what to say to ease her pain. He noticed the wooden sword on the floor and remembered his duel with the Prince. "You have proven yourself so rules or not, I shall train you to become a High Guard. You have earned that right... now dry your eyes. Tears are not becoming of a warrior."

Chapter Two

Time Passes

Fourteen seasons later...

Edward woke, gasping in his bed. He sat up as sweat glistened his slim muscular chest, and then he looked around the dark room disoriented from his fierce dream. A woman lay beside him and rolled over at his cry, returning to her sleep. This wasn't the first time he'd screamed in the middle of the night. A High Guard, who had a thick brown beard and an easy-going demeanor, opened the door to his chamber as firelight from oil lamps broke in, casting shadows, and then the High Guard asked, "My lord?" Edward wiped his face and raked his hands through his shoulder-length raven-black hair and then told him, "Just another nightmare, Melee." "They are becoming more frequent. Do you remember the dream this time?" "Only images," Edward answered as he closed his blue eyes, remembering the violent sights. "I see a terrible Beast in the midst of a great battle. Its war cry stabs my soul like a knife. I want to flee, but I see the Mystic Rose above the conflict. Many die around me because of the Beast." He opened his eyes as he stated, "That is all I remember. That is all I ever remember." He looked at a wooden pedestal in the middle of the room and on it, the Mystic Rose magically suspended within a protective glass dome as a supernatural glow illuminated the pedestal. The illumination depended on the color the Mystic Rose's petals assumed and at the moment, they were yellow. Edward got up, poured water from a pitcher into a washbasin, splashed his face, and then stated, "I cannot remember a time when I did not have the dreams. Why do I have them?" He stared at the water lit by fire as he asked, "And why do I fear them?" He grabbed a towel, dried his face, and then spoke, "Court wise men say the Beast is me while others say it's a great enemy coming to devour our kingdom." He looked at the High Guard and inquired, "What do you think?" "I don't know, my lord," Melee answered. "Maybe a dream is only a dream." The High Guard's answer didn't help Edward. He didn't understand why he must bear the burden of the visions. Edward knew the dreams were telling him something. He just didn't know what. The Prince lay back in bed, finding no comfort with the stranger beside him as he ordered, "You may leave, Melee. I have an important sun's cycle tomorrow and need to get what sleep I can." He clinched his blankets as he continued, "Before the sun is high, we set sail to fetch my intended, Princess Virago of Morgog, and head for the Isle of Kismet for the Amalgamation." Edward pondered the nightmare some more and wondered if the Princess or the Morgog Kingdom could be the Beast. Their kingdoms had been rivals in the past so this alliance would be an uneasy one. He thought about it some more, and then he considered that he should fear what was coming.

* * *

Pluck, like a Ghost Panther, leapt about the trees, not straying far from the temple. She loved soaring from limb to limb as if gravity had no pull on her. Freedom and peace engulfed her, erasing her curse at least for a few nals as night spread its wings over the sky and only the moons, Auror the Greater and Array the Lesser, penetrated its dark hold. Pluck scurried to the top of the tallest tree and studied the heavenly bodies. Even in the vastness of the night, Auror and Array

were magnificent and possessed a power of their own. It was a power that affected the tides and her mood. She smiled, taking a deep breath of the pine-scented air, mesmerized by the pale blue spheres. Pluck felt a wildness take hold, and it was a surge of emotion that ignited her senses. The feral sensations triggered a memory of Fairah hovering above the four cat statues within the temple. Pluck was nine at the time.

In the memory...

"Why do ye cry, child?" Fairah questioned the young girl. Pluck wiped her little eyes while she sat next to the pool in the center of the temple as she replied, "I hate how I look." She peered at her reflection on the water as she added, "I'm ugly." "That is not true," Fairah told her. She hated seeing Pluck upset. The Protector searched the room, noticed the large cats below her, and then asked, "Did I ever tell ye why these statues are here?" She swiped her spirit hand through the head of one as she stated, "They guard this temple and each was chosen for their virtues." Pluck sniffed as she questioned, "Why tell me?" "Each of them is within ye," Fairah explained to her as she floated down and sat next to Pluck. "The strength, heart, and loyalty of the Fire Lion; the speed, enthusiasm, and stability of the Striped Cheetah; the courage, stamina, and dedication of the Woolly Tiger; and the stealth, cunning, and dauntlessness of the Ghost Panther." She smiled and then added, "They not only make up what ye look like but what ye are inside. Ye's curse can be a blessing if ye can get past ye's appearance."

The present...

"Fairah is right about one thing," Pluck said to herself as she stared up at the night. "I feel them with- in me. They're my animal side." She stretched out on a branch, stared up at the multitude of stars, and breathed in the refreshing air as her black-tip tail swayed. Pluck felt at home, at least some of her did. A small part yearned for human contact and to return to the Fletching Castle as sorrow enveloped her. She scolded herself, "I'm not going to focus on it. I've been sad long enough. I'm going to enjoy the rest of the night." The moons set as dawn drew near, and songs came with the new sun's cycle as birds sang to the fresh day. Pluck climbed down a vine and rushed into the temple as her long tail twitched with excitement. She had slept little but felt as bright and chipper as the infant sun's cycle. "Another beautiful night. You should have seen it, Fairah. The moons were blue and full and from the Lofty Pine, I could almost touch the smallest one," Pluck spoke as she twirled and danced around the pool. "At sunset, the sky became amber and burned across the horizon." Her white High Guard's sleeved shirt fluttered with her movements as her clawed feet pranced about to an imagined melody. The brown leather pants she wore were baggy from the knees down. Pluck finished her dance and knelt by the water, studying her reflection by torchlight. Since the birth of her beast form, there had been few changes. She had grown eight hands tall, tall as an average man. Her fiery-crimson mane had thickened and flowed just below her shoulders. She had grown a set of breasts, and her ears were round- ed and cupped. She looked at her hand, at least she still had fingers even if they had retractable claws. Emerald feline eyes stared back at her. "The memory of my human form has faded," Pluck said as she frowned. "Ye better not let Han see ye cry," Fairah told her as she appeared above her and floated down to her side. "I'm not crying," Pluck said as she wiped her eyes. "Anyway, he won't be here till tomorrow. The letter sent by Courier Pigeon stated he had news for me." Pluck grabbed her long beige tail and stroked its black-tip as she spoke, "I wonder

what he wants to tell me. Could it be about the Prince or maybe he's found another way to end my curse?" Fairah sighed as she threw up her metaphysical hands, and then she said, "The commander could assist ye much better if ye would only tell him the promise that was made between ye and the Prince, and then ye would have no need for any other cure." Pluck frowned again as she said, "I fear he'll try to stop me from receiving the Kiss and that's why I haven't told Han all of these seasons." Pluck lay on the stones, gazing at the ceiling as she stated, "The Kiss isn't something the Prince gives away. It pledges his heart and soul." She paused and said with a hint of sadness, "Edward may have already given his first kiss to someone." She rolled over, looked at her reflection again, and then continued, "If this is true, I'll remain in this accursed body." Fairah's spirit hand stroked her mane. The Protector wished she had a corporeal form to comfort the woman she'd come to consider her child. Fairah told her, "I know not what to say. There is beauty in ye's form if only ye would see it." Pluck sat up and said, "Even if I did, people would consider me a Necrom. I would be shunned with only an apparition and an old High Guard to keep me company." She slunk to her blankets on a bed of hay and once she reached them, she requested, "Tell me again about the Creator." Fairah grinned as she questioned, "Are ye not a little old for bedtime stories?" "Are they just stories?" Pluck questioned as she pulled up her blanket, looking into Fairah's solid white eyes. "No, child," Fairah replied as she floated to her. "In an explosion of life, the Creator brought Terra into existence. All was perfect. No wars, sickness, or sadness. One sun's cycle the Despiser, his real name lost in time, wished to be worshiped like the Creator so he lied to those of Terra. He told them magic could be used for more than helping others, that it could be used to help one's self and with that, magic became corrupted. So now there is magic of the Creator and magic of the Despiser." "Not everyone believes this?" "No, like the Necroms the Creator has fallen into Myth. Many do not believe." "I believe," Pluck stated as she turned on her side, and then she repeated, "I believe." Fairah lifted into the air, and she slowly vanished as she said, "Good... Never forget. He shall protect ye." "Peaceful night," Pluck spoke. "Peaceful night," Fairah said in turn as her form completely disappeared.

* * *

The next sun's cycle twilight broke over the forest of Naught. Black Feathered Yaws greeted the morning with their high pitched shrills. Inside the temple, Pluck's cat ears twitched as she heard two horses approaching. "It must be Han," she spoke to herself, grinning mischievously and scurried for a hiding place. Han entered the large room and cautiously searched every shadow as she softly growled at him ready to pounce on him. He told her, "There's no time for your game this morning, Pluck. We must leave. The Prince's ship shall not wait for us." "Leave? Ship?" Pluck questioned as she emerged from behind the statue of the Woolly Tiger, forgetting her game. "What do you mean?" He didn't know she was hiding there. Her abilities had greatly improved since he started training her. Han would have had her joined the ranks of the High Guards long ago if not for her curse and if not for her gender. Han answered her, "Empress Candiss has died. The time of the new Amalgamation has come. Edward sets sail to collect his betrothed. Together, they shall sail for the Isle of Kismet to claim the crowns of Emperor and Empress. All of the High Guards shall escort him. Great danger awaits all who attempt the crown." "All High Guards?" Pluck uttered as she pointed to herself. "You mean even me? Go where I'll be seen?" His statement confused her, and she questioned, "But how?" She looked at her hands, examining

her fingers and palms that were bare but the rest of her hands were covered in short beige fur like her body, and then she asked, "Will your men accept me?" Han told her, "Pluck, I didn't train you so you could stay in this temple forever. You are a High Guard and one of the finest I've ever schooled. Here..." He lifted a long cloak, a pair of boots, and gloves he'd been carrying in one hand as he said, "These shall keep you disguised until the others and yourself become accustomed to your condition." She took the brown leather cloak, boots, and gloves. "Put them on," he ordered. Pluck hooked the cloak's clasp around her neck, pulled on the gloves, and slipped into the knee-high boots, and then she asked, "When will we return?" Han thought about it, and then he answered, "The journey shall take over a season." He showed her a pin as he said, "There are two other things." "A Charging Black Elk, the Fletching insignia," Pluck exclaimed as she beamed with pride as he fastened the gold and black pin to her cloak just above her heart. He lifted a long object wrapped in a red cloth. He unwrapped a rapier, a matching main gauche, and a belt with a sword frog, and then he handed them to her. She took the sword and matching dagger as she uttered, "An Accolade Sword!" "Yes, the weapon of honor. It's official, Pluck." Pride beamed from his face as he stated, "You're a High Guard." She grabbed the hilt of the rapier, and its silvery brass hand guard twisted over her hand like a vine. Pluck unsheathed the sword and studied its long slender blade. "The finest weapon in the land," he said, and then Han folded his arms before he uttered, "Now..." He noticed her tail twitching under her cloak, and he questioned, "What are we to do about that?" Pluck looked back and said, "Watch." She parted her cloak, revealing her waist, wrapped her tail around herself like a belt, and tucked the tip inside the tail opposite her sword. Her actions amused him as he commented, "Interesting trick. Your tail is like a third arm." The sun rose high enough to peer into the temple's Eastern windows as he said, "Time we go, come." "I will," she told him as she turned and looked at the room and pool which had been her home for fourteen seasons. "I only have to say farewell." Han turned and peered around the room as if expecting to see something or someone he hadn't seen since Pluck had been cursed. He had always wondered if the protector of the Mystic Rose had kept in contact with her, and he finally had his answer. He told her as he left the great room and headed through the hall, "I shall ready the horses." Pluck waited until she heard him leave the temple, and then she yelled, "Fairah! Fairah, I'm leaving." "Yes, I heard, child," the protector spoke as she appeared above the pool and floated down to her like a ghostly dove of splendor and light. Pluck looked at her and for a few moments, she remembered the wrath-filled woman whose piercing white-eyes crackled with magic when she first appeared to her as a child. The beautiful woman with equally white hair had terrified her as a child with her fierce rage and swift retaliation to what the protector, at the time, thought was an injustice. As Pluck grew and the sun's cycles turned into seasons, she found that Fairah had a very kind side to her. She wasn't this ghastly wielder of magic but someone she could depend on and learn from. Fairah had a fondness for her as much as she had a fondness for the protector. She was her constant guardian. Fairah filled a role in her life that had been vacant when she lived among the royal court. She was bound to Pluck, not as the witch who cursed her or even as the protector of the Mystic Rose. Fairah had found a very special place in her heart. "The commander is correct," Fairah told her. "Many dangers await all who take this journey. The Prince shall many times depend on ye for his safety." "I understand that, but did you hear him? I won't be back for more than a season." "What is this face for?" Fairah questioned her as she lifted her spectral hand to Pluck's chin. "Shall ye miss this old witch?" "You've been like a..." She couldn't finish with the word mother and said

instead, "You've been here when no one else was." She sniffed, fighting back tears as she replied, "So yes, I'll miss you, witch or not." Fairah told her, "Then let me give ye a parting gift. One I have been wishing to give ye these many seasons but had not the power." She lifted her hands and green energy swirled around herself, and then the power ceased as she landed on the ground. Fairah smiled again and placed her arms around Pluck, embracing her. Her touch startled Pluck, but then she returned her hug. Pluck couldn't remember a time when she felt more happy or sad. It had been seasons since she felt the touch of another and felt their love, and now she had to depart. "I don't want to leave you, but I have my duty," Pluck told her as she sniffed again, rubbing her panther nose. "Hopefully, I'll return as I was when I first entered this temple." Fairah stroked her mane as she said, "There... there... child." Fairah leaned back to look into her face and told her, "I shall be here when ye return. Know that." She grabbed her furry chin and pulled Pluck's gaze to hers. "Whether woman or beast, I shall be waiting." Pluck nodded, unable to say anything and started for the exit. Fairah grabbed her left gloved hand, lifted it so Pluck could see, and then told her, "One last thing before ye leave. The marks on ye's finger, they are more than tattoos. They are ye's connection to the Mystic Rose. It chose ye, remember that. Now ye should be on ye's way. Han shall be waiting." Pluck hugged her again and then ran out. A tear streamed down Fairah's face as she spoke, "Look at me." She wiped the wetness away before losing her corporeal form. "I am the one who ended up crying."

Chapter Three

Breakneck and Waterswift

The blue-gray hills of the land of Naught gave way to the flat country of the Flush Plains. Han nudged his horse to pick up speed through the tall blue-gray grass. The steed gnawed at the bit but obeyed as Han glanced at Pluck and questioned her, "You haven't said a word since we started our journey. Is something bothering you?" "Many things," she answered. "Will the High Guards accept me? Is it too late to end my curse?" She muttered under her breath so he couldn't hear, "If it's not, will Edward give me the Kiss or will he save it for his new wife?" Han hated that she kept the cure to her curse a secret all of these seasons, and he said, "If you would only tell me what pact you and the Prince made, I might be able to help you." She stared at the distant shore as she told him, "When I am ready, I promise Han, I'll tell you." He nodded, not understanding but respected her decision, looked ahead, and said, "Time you pulled on your hood. We're nearing the port." Pluck and Han slowed their horses to a trot upon entering the large fishing village. Heron was like any in the Fletching Kingdom. The village had three taverns, a market, many huts, and a baron's house sat on the hill. Many peasants walked the streets while a few nobles rode through in carriages. Voices filled the air along with the cries of Gray Gulls as a salty breeze and the smell of fish hit Han. He pointed as he told her, "The ships are ahead." "Han, does the Prince know I'm coming?" The commander halted his steed as he told her, "Pluck, I never told you this, but Edward doesn't remember you or that sun's cycle in the temple. It was too much for him." She pulled on the reins as her heart sunk. Pluck stared at the horse's mane, not wanting Han to see her hurt expression. She had been able to endure the curse

because she always hoped one sun's cycle it would be lifted, but she always assumed Edward appreciated her actions. Pluck put a gloved hand to her chest as her soul ached, knowing her sacrifice was forgotten. She turned to Han and questioned, "If an act is unremembered, did it ever happen? Does it mean anything?" "Pluck, I remember what you did and what you lost," Han told her and then nudged his steed forward, and she followed as he said, "To answer your question, I believe an act good or evil is never forgotten." They neared the docks and dismounted. Breakneck and Waterswift, two of the Fletching six masts Royal Navy ships, were loading supplies. Most of the High Guards and their horses were already aboard, awaiting their commander's arrival. "We're to board the Breakneck, that is Prince Edward's ship," Han told her as he grabbed his horse's reins and led the animal toward the plank. Pluck started to follow when she heard an old woman's voice. Outside a supply store, three men harassed an elderly couple. Her emerald feline eyes flashed with anger within the shadow of her hood. "Foul Dreggs," she muttered and shouted, "Wait, Han! Here..." Pluck handed him her reins, and then she told him, "I must deal with these fiendish brutes." Han noticed the couple, and he argued, "There's no time for this." She faced him, surprised by the commander's words, and then she questioned him, "No time?" The cloak shadowed her outraged face as she considered his words. Surely this wasn't her teacher speaking. Maybe this was a test. Pluck said, "I can't believe you said that." She calmed herself and then questioned him, "What's the High Guard vow?" Han muttered to himself, "So the student has become the instructor." He then answered, "We do all things to glorify the Creator, we pledge loyalty to the crown, we swear to protect the Fletching people and property and above all, we forfeit our lives for the Royal Family." She nodded and told him, "Very good. I shouldn't be too long." Pluck approached the three men like a dauntless Ghost Panther stalking the jungles, and then she deepened her voice as she spoke, "Is there something I can do for you gentlemen?" One of the thugs, who had a missing front tooth, barked, "No." He turned and faced the cloaked stranger who had a gruff voice, and then the thug said, "Now why don't ya mind yer own business and move on?" Pluck parted her cloak and revealed her Accolade Sword as she told him, "I'm afraid I can't do that." "Matt, he's a High Guard," another thug voiced, assuming she was a he. "Crell... He'll have our fasses!" the thug exclaimed as he backed away from the cloaked figure. "I think not," Matt said as he placed his hand on the hilt of his bastard sword. "Crell! What do we do?" the third thug questioned as he and his companion readied their maces, glancing around skittishly like Plains Rabbits. Matt saw the shipload of High Guards watching them. Even if they took down the smug one in front of them, the rest would surely kill them. Matt spat on the ground and backed up, relenting as he said, "Our business here's completed." He turned, cursing and stomped down the dirt street as he barked, "Come on!" Pluck watched the three men walk off, then turned to the elderly couple, and asked, "Can I help you load your cart?" "No thank you, kind sir. We're grateful you came to our aid. Please..." The man handed her a wheel of cheese as he said, "Take this with our gratitude." Pluck nodded, took the yellow cheese, headed for the Breakneck, and boarded the ship. She found Han standing at the gangplank after he had loaded their horses into the stable of the lower deck. "Didn't even draw your sword, quite the beast," Han told her as he glanced hungrily at the cheddar. "What are you going to do with the wheel?" She grinned at his pun and at his apparent craving for cheese and told him, "You can have it." Han waved over a cabin boy and had the lad take the cheddar to his quarters, and then Han told her, "My thanks." He motioned for her to follow him to a group of men. Four High Guards stood at attention as their commander approached. Each wore a white long-sleeved shirt,

brown leather pants, and a red cape with the Fletching insignia of a charging Black Elk pinned above their heart. Each was armed with a rapier and matching main gauche. Han motioned to the tallest of the group and said, "This is Ardor, my Second. He's the finest swordsman in the land." The long black haired man with a muscular build was also beardless and had a small scar under his right eye, and he stepped forward as he said, "So this must be Pluck, the High Guard you've been training in the North." Ardor looked over their newest member, wondering what Han saw in him. Over the last few seasons, Han spent most of his time in the North. There was a possibility that this High Guard was better than him and if so, he felt this newcomer would be in the running to replace the commander when the time came. He rested his hand on his hilt, thinking he would watch him closely. "Yes, this is Pluck," Han replied, and then he motioned to a red-headed man with a pointed beard. "This is Fracas, master of the bow and Head Archer." "Ah..." Fracas spoke as he reached out, grabbed Pluck's gloved hand, and shook it as he said, "So... I've heard you've also split a few arrows." Fracas would have to test his arm, pit his skill against Pluck's, and see if Pluck was as good as Han boasted. Pluck returned the thin man's shake as she said, "I'm nowhere near your skill." "Modesty," a blond headed man spoke as he slapped her back nearly knocking her down, and then he spoke, "We shall have to keep an eye on you." Han said, "This Forest Ox of a man is Parry and to his right is Sinew. He's the silent one and our finest tracker." Pluck looked at the large muscular man with a blond goatee and then to the last. Sinew was short, had a shaven head, and a long black mustache. She nodded to them. Parry leaned down to Sinew's ear and questioned, "So which initiation should we use to induct this one? The bloody sheep's bag in the bed or the Night Prowlers Raid?" "The latter," Sinew answered as he stroked his long mustache. "Why hold back?" Parry nodded as he replied, "Good. The first night he isn't on duty we strike." Han turned to Ardor and asked him, "Are we ready to set sail?" "Yes, all of our men and supplies are loaded," Ardor answered, and then he headed for the Breakneck's captain. "Let us see how long until her crew's ready." The rest of the men headed for their stations as Pluck followed Han and Ardor up to the bridge. "Waterswift has set sail for the mouth of the bay to scout for any of Commery, Swelldom, or Hort's ships," Ardor continued. "Two nights ago a Commery vessel was spotted. It isn't likely they shall attack so close to the mainland, but one never knows." He walked up the steps to the bridge as he said, "We await the Prince's arrival." "Then you wait no longer," Edward declared as he stood at the top of the gangplank with Melee his personal guard behind him. The Prince's disdain of King Stark's orders was apparent on his face. His father forced him to leave his lovers behind. His father said it wouldn't be proper to have them along on his wedding voyage, not only would he have no companionship on the journey, but he was to marry a woman he'd never seen. He feared that she was ghastly. Edward asked, "How long until we get this wretched voyage on its way?" Ardor nodded to the skipper, and Captain Brine stepped forward and answered, "We shall set sail now, my lord." Pluck studied her prince and her childhood friend. Edward had changed. He was a man. She looked over his royal garb consisting of a blue silk shirt, white cotton pants, and a gold silk sash girded his waist. A large gold medallion with the charging Black Elk decorated his neck. He was a handsome man and this fact saddened her. What was she thinking? Why would he kiss one so monstrous as she? Even if it ended her curse, Edward doesn't know her or remember her. Why did she get her hopes up? "Very good," Edward answered. "Have someone show me my quarters and bring along my things." "At once, my lord," Brine said, and then he shouted orders to his crew, and soon they were on their way. A great wind caught Breakneck's sails and pushed her

over the blue-green waters. Seaspray moistened the cool air as Gray Gulls filled the cloudless sky. Pluck stood at a railing, looked at the ocean, and held on to her hood as the salty wind whipped at her face. She had never been out to sea before. It was a completely different world. Pluck felt a hand touch her shoulder, so she turned and uttered, "Han." "I have assigned you to be one of Edward's personal guards along with Melee. One of you must always be at his side." "I'm afraid to approach the Prince, so how can I be his bodyguard?" she questioned him as she glanced at the water. "I don't think—" "Then don't," Han interrupted. "This assignment shall give you a chance to get to know Edward. Maybe then he shall come to remember you and the pledge and then once and for all, he shall shatter your curse." He looked across the horizon as he spoke, "Until that happens, do your job and let time deal with forgotten memories. I have confidence things shall work out." "I don't know," Pluck said. "Maybe it's better I don't get my hopes up." She changed the subject by asking, "How many sun's cycles till we reach the Morgog Kingdom?" "Four. A lot can happen in that time," he spoke to reassure her. "Seize the opportunities when they come."

Chapter Four

Port of Pass

Lookouts searched the seas for enemy ships from their lofty perch in the crow's nests. The sun's cycle faded, and the air grew chilly as the cabin boy lit the ship's lanterns. Night came ever darkening the amber sky until there was no trace of the sun. The full moons crept over the ship, casting a ghostly glow on the dark ocean. In the distance and in the depths of the sea, Horned Whales sang their sad hypnotic song. Pluck had never heard such an enchanting melody. It made her homesick for Fairah, the temple, and the night sounds of the forest. The sea was so different. Pluck held her post outside the Prince's quarters as the first part of the night went by uneventful. She stood below deck, swaying with the ship with only her thoughts to keep her company. She muttered, "I don't think I'll ever get used to this. The floor's never still." She nodded to Bulwark who passed her in the hall. Pluck remembered the old High Guard from her childhood and wished she could tell him who she was. He and Von had always been so kind to her. Pluck sighed, tapping her hilt as her mind drifted. Four sun's cycles until they reached Morgog. What would Princess Virago be like? Pretty, she assumed. Her mind returned to the ship and to the loneliness of her post. This was frustrating... Pluck didn't see how she and Edward would ever get to know each other if all she did was stand out while he slept. Han needed to... The Prince screamed and filled her thoughts with images of that fateful sun's cycle in the temple. She turned in a panic and went to his aid. "Edward!" Pluck yelled as she opened the door and rushed in ready to draw her sword. She found him sitting up in bed breathing heavily, and so she asked, "Are you all right?" "I am fine. It was a mere nightmare," he replied as he looked at Pluck and noticed who he thought was a man wasn't Melee. Edward said, "I do not know you." His words cut at her heart as she stuttered, "I..." She composed herself and said, "I am Pluck. I took over for Melee." Edward put a hand to his head and spoke, "That is right. Han spoke of this." Silence followed, so she broke the awkward moment with a question and asked, "What

was it about?" "Hmm..." he voiced as he examined the shadowy figure in the hall's light. "What was what about and why are you wearing a hooded cloak instead of the High Guard cape?" "I was asking about your dream," Pluck replied as she took a few steps into the room. "As for my hood, it's no disrespect to you. It hides my appearance. It's quite startling." "When I was younger, one of the old soldiers wore a hood. His face had been maimed during the last Amalgamation. Is this the same with you?" She replied, "I wasn't maimed during an Amalgamation but, yes, you could say I'm the way I am because I was defending the Fletching family. Now—" She walked up to his bed and questioned, "—your dream?" "Nightmare," Edward answered as he wiped his clammy face. "I have it every night. I see this horrible Beast that resembles a Necrom, and it is in the midst of a great battle." Horrible Beast? Pluck's heart fluttered. Was he dreaming of her? Edward continued, "The Beast slays hundreds, but still it is unwavering. It screams like a Ghost Panther and then the Beast turns, and I can see its piercing green eyes. It charges after me. I am afraid and cry out and that is when I wake. The dream is always the same." He turned to her as a glimmer of hope crossed his face, and he questioned, "What do you think? I have asked many, but none can give me an answer." Pluck began, "Maybe the Beast is not horrible. Maybe she's trying to tell you something. Have you ever tried not to fear the Beast and let her approach you? You know it's a dream, so the Beast can't hurt you." She..? He never said the Beast was a he or a she. Edward cleared his dry throat and said, "No, I have never tried to do anything in the nightmares. I do not know if I can. They are so terrible." "Not if you know they are made by your mind," she said and then suggested, "Next time you have one, don't fear the Beast. Let her approach you. It may be the only way to end them." "I shall try. Thank you. You may leave now, ah..." "Pluck." "Yes," Edward said as he lay back and grabbed his covers. "Close the door as you leave."

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Edward emerged from below with Pluck following. The bright sun shone through the clouded sky, and he squinted, putting his hand up to shade his eyes. Sailors were busy about their work as he walked up to the bridge, and Captain Brine had the helm. "How do we fare?" Edward asked. "Very well, my lord. We should arrive at Pass Island by late sun's cycle," Brine replied as he gripped the wheel's spokes. "We shall add a few more supplies along with your presents for your bride and by tomorrow morning, we shall be sailing for the Morgog Kingdom." "Have any enemy ships been spotted?" "No," Brine answered as he pointed beyond the bow to a ship in the distance. "Wind Swift sails ahead of us. She signals every nal but has yet to spot a vessel. Most eerie, considering this is a trade route." Melee approached them and motioned that he would take over for Pluck. She nodded and headed below. Pluck had never been so tired. All the standing around doing nothing. She headed for Han's quarters which he shared with her and Ardor. Pluck entered, finding both men gone and examined the bunks. They were so small and enclosed, she didn't know if she could sleep in them. Pluck climbed into the top one and removed her boots and gloves. She unclasped her cloak, laid it to the side, and released her tail from around her waist as she exclaimed, "Ahh..." Pluck sighed and muttered, "More than a season of this. I don't know if I can do it." She lay on her stomach, allowing her tail to twitch about. She missed running freely through the forest, she missed the temple, and she missed Fairah. Pluck tried to sleep but couldn't. There were so many new sounds and smells, and the ship swayed. Her eyelids gradually grew heavy, and soon she succumbed to exhaustion. Later that

sun's cycle, she heard footsteps approach her cabin and quickly pulled on her cloak. Ardor opened the door, and he ordered, "Awake, Pluck. We dock in Pass." Pass was smaller than Heron but just as busy. Edward disembarked along with Melee and Pluck. She went along for extra security. They rode to the middle of the small island where a trader named Purveyor had gathered gifts for Princess Virago from the Five Kingdoms. An old white-haired beggar shaded himself under a Cobalt Oak near the trader's store. His dull blue eyes stared off into the distance, and they were vacant as the shell that sat there. The beggar, who was dressed in rags, tilted his head as the three dismounted and he smiled, revealing his rotten teeth. He came to life like a stringed puppet, holding out his wooden bowl for a coin. He pointed a bony finger at Pluck and yelled, "You... I know yer kind. You are touched..." he blared. "You are touched!" "Sounds like someone else is touched," Melee said as he tapped his head. Edward chuckled and went into the store, leaving Melee to watch the horses. Pluck paused and glanced at the beggar and then at her tattooed finger hidden by her glove. He had pointed right at her and said her kind, but she was alone in her curse. Pluck followed the Prince into the store as she muttered, "Crazy beggar." Many oddities and rare gifts filled the shelves of Purveyor's store. Weapons old and new were exhibited in display cases and hung on walls. Stuffed creatures, some of which neither of them had seen before, stood throughout the room, and other trinkets laid about. "Ah... Prince Edward..." Purveyor said as he approached them with his arms wide. He was a well-rounded man and nearly as wide as he was tall. "Good to see you again." He grabbed the Prince's hand, kissed his royal ring, and then said, "Come, come, I have the items you ordered. This way..." Purveyor led them to the back as he spoke, "Twenty bolts of Sol Silk, four dozen Blood Pearls from the coast of Benin, Red Ivory, Black Diamonds, and the finest gems." He pointed to crate after crate as he told them, "Here's the Cobalt Silver, Fire-white Gold, and Ruby Glass." Pluck closely watched the trader, searching for signs he might attack the Prince. She sensed he couldn't be trusted, and the store made her uneasy. The scent of many dead animals filled the room, and she felt as if the fleshy statues watched them. They shouldn't have done that to the animals. It wasn't right. Would they want their carcasses on display? When they entered the back room, she felt a familiar presence, and it added to her unsettling sensations. She put her hand to her hilt as the low rumblings of a Woolly Tiger permeated the room. The Prince and Purveyor didn't hear the low roar. Her heart pounded. It was like that sun's cycle long ago when she and Edward first entered the temple. Pluck searched the room but found no large cats, not that she thought she would. In a corner, a flash of metal caught her eye. It was odd since no sunlight broke into the room. The glint came from a sword. Pluck turned to Edward for guidance, but he was busy talking with the trader. She turned back to the weapon. Was she meant to see the sword? Pluck walked to the hand-and-a-half sword, grabbed the black scabbard, and examined the strange markings adorning the leather. The steel of the handle was almost white like the hottest fire. She grabbed the hilt which had a large sphere pommel and a power throbbed through the grip like a pulse. The energy excited her, so she unsheathed the sword and felt a force flow through it almost like it was alive. She discovered that more markings engraved the blade and that it was exquisitely crafted. Pluck lifted the weapon, testing its weight, and it was well balanced. Delight swelled in her, and she had to have the sword. She smoothed her glove over the ancient lettering of the blade and spoke its name, "Lux the Lightning Sword." Pluck was surprised she could read the archaic words. She sheathed the Lux and walked to Purveyor who was still trying to flatter the Prince with his business prowess. "You wouldn't believe what I

traded to acquire this Sol Silk. Cooking pots," Purveyor started as he put his hand to his round belly and laughed. "Yes, now that was a deal." Edward said, "One I imagine you shall pass on to the consumer." "Yes, of course, my lord," Purveyor stated as his face paled. "How much for this sword?" Pluck questioned as she showed the weapon to the trader. "That sword..." Purveyor started as he eyed the Prince, making sure he listened. "Now that is an interesting piece, though I am sad to say the blade must have rusted. No one has been able to remove it from its housing." He rubbed his hands together as he said, "It would still make a nice piece to display if you're interested." She told him, "I removed the blade without difficulty." "You must be mistaken. I should know. I've had that sword for many seasons," Purveyor said, then turned to the Prince, and stated, "See, I am an honest businessman." "Is this so?" Edward asked as he glanced at the weapon, then faced the trader, and told him, "If the sword does not function, then it should be given away." "Given?" Purveyor uttered as if someone stole a precious gem from him. He couldn't bear the thought of losing money on a trade. "Given, you say?" he questioned again as he reached out his hand and said, "May I see the sword?" She handed him the scabbard. Purveyor grabbed the hilt and tried to remove the hand-and-a-half sword, but it wouldn't budge. He shook his head, studied its finely crafted handle and scabbard, and then sighed. He lifted the sheath with both hands, returned the weapon, and gave in to pressure as he said, "You're right, my lord. I give this sword as a gift to your High Guard." Pluck accepted the scabbard as she said, "Thank you." She strapped the sword over her shoulder so that the scabbard rested on her back at an angle. Pluck wondered if there was magic within the sword as there was magic within her. Why else could the trader not unsheathe the Lux? Edward removed several bags of gold and told the trader, "Our business is then concluded. Have the gifts brought to my ship right away. Here are a thousand pieces. You shall receive the remaining ten thousand once the items are delivered." "Yes, of course," Purveyor said as he greedily took the bags. "They shall be there within the nal." "Pluck!" Melee shouted from outside. "To arms!" She entered the front room, drew her rapier and main gauche, and looked at the Prince as Edward drew his. They both rushed outside while the trader glanced out his windows. Melee had his weapons drawn on seven horsemen. "You!" Pluck shouted as she pointed her sword at their leader. "You're the one who harassed that couple at Heron." Matt bowed while he sat upon his saddle as he said, "I'm honored ya remembered me. It makes it easier. Ya know we have some business to satisfy." "Maybe," Pluck spoke as she glanced at Edward and then to Melee. "Why don't we return things as they were? These two will leave and then we'll discuss our business." Matt laughed, revealing his missing front tooth as he replied, "No, they'll stay." Pluck said as she stepped closer to the horsemen, "I don't think you followed us all this way because I prevented you from stealing a wheel of cheese." She demanded, "What's your true purpose here?" "Yes!" Edward spoke up. "Who hired you? Which of the Kingdoms? Commery, Swelldom, or Hort?" Matt smiled like a Black-faced Jackal finding a carcass as he told them, "That I can't tell ya." He commanded his men, "Kill the High Guards, but don't harm the Prince, at least not yet." He slid off his horse as his men dismounted, and three men started for Pluck. Matt ordered, "No, stand down. That Phragg is mine." Matt drew his bastard sword and lunged for Pluck as he said, "Ya High Guards are so archaic." She deflected his attack and then questioned him, "Why do you say that?" Pluck countered with a volley of cuts. "Ya have fallen behind the times. Look at the weapons yer using," Matt stated after he leaped from the swipes. "Sure yer rapiers might be the finest in the land, but they're useless against weapons like these." He swung his bastard sword

over his head and brought it down, breaking her rapier in half. Shock seized her as the steel failed her, and she stared at the broken blade in the dirt. All those seasons she'd yearned to wield a weapon as fine as the Accolade Sword, and now she stood before seven Dreggs defeated in her first duel. "See, I've proven my point," Matt said as he readied his sword for another attack. "Now I'll thrust it into yer heart." Her instincts took over, and she leapt back, landing on a boulder she had seen several feet away. She threw the hilt of the rapier to the ground and stared at her main gauche. Matt yelled at her outraged, but then he grinned and said, "Yer very agile, High Guard, but yer still without a weapon." He lifted both hands and declared, "And outnumbered." He charged the boulder. Pluck ran for a Lofty Pine, scurried to its lowest branch, crouched on all fours, and studied the situation. She wanted to scream at the Dregg, but she had to control herself and keep the Beast within her reins. "Come down here and die like a man," Matt ordered as he cut into the tree with his sword. The blade wedged into the wood, and he couldn't disengage it. "As soon as I get this free, I'm coming after ya." She ignored Matt, looked at the three men watching them, then to the two fighting Melee, and finally to the one attacking the Prince. Pluck could remove her cloak, and her appearance might frighten the Dreggs into running, but it would kill her chances at ending her curse. Pluck reached up and grabbed her hood as she glanced at the Prince. She couldn't let her selfish reasoning jeopardize Edward's life, but maybe there was still another way. Moments seemed like nals as Pluck pondered her next action. Edward and Melee fought courageously as she stood idle. Pluck decided she had to and then as if the wind carried the sound from a distant land, she heard the Woolly Tiger's roar. Pine needles rustled as relief swept over her for there was hope. Pluck sheathed her dagger and moved her hand past the hood to the pommel of the hand-and-a-half sword. She'd almost forgotten about the Lux. "What's wrong, High Guard?" Matt asked as he grunted to free his weapon. "Ya look lost. Are ya as fragile as yer sword?" Pluck leapt over his head, flipped, and landed on her feet. She unsheathed her new weapon and thunder rumbled from a cloudless sky. Matt's toothless smile faded as he exclaimed, "Crell! Yer not weaponless!" Purveyor watched from a window and uttered, "By Fletching! How did you remove it?" He remembered himself and covered his mouth, hiding again in the shadow of his store. The thug fighting Edward forced the sword from the Prince's hand, and then he said, "Matt, I have him." He placed the tip of his blade to Edward's throat and blood trickled down the Prince's neck. Pluck held her breath. They couldn't kill him. She had to save him, but how? "Easy there," Matt commanded his man. "We aren't paid to spill royal blood." He turned his attention back to Pluck and ordered her, "Drop yer sword." If she did, there was no chance for them. Pluck had to taunt him into a fight, so she shouted, "Are you afraid to meet me now that I've a weapon that matches yours?" Matt's men looked at him. Even the ones fighting Melee glanced back to see how he would answer. "Fass! I fear no man!" he declared. "Least of all yer petty attempts to sway me from my job. Men, let's go. We have what we came for." "No!" Melee shouted, trying to get past the two he dueled to reach his prince, but they prevented him. One broke through his defenses and cut him across the arm. Melee dropped his rapier as blood ran from his cut and spotted his white shirt, but the injury to his arm was slight. Pluck watched horrified and her terror turned to rage as she felt a rumbling. At first, she thought the ground shook, and then she realized her sword quaked, shaking her with its intensity. She feared the Lux's might and yet relished in it. Pluck lifted the sword, and lightning crackled from the blade and ionized the air around her. She felt the sword's energy surge through her arm and she roared, enthralled by its vigor as she yelled, "It has so much power!" Pluck placed her

other hand to the hilt to control its rampage. "Ah... Matt, what the Crell is that sword doing?" one of his men asked. "Fass! Don't know." Pluck rushed Matt and then engaged him and each time her blade met his steel, lightning flashed and sparks flew. She furiously attacked, not giving Matt a chance to counter. Her fierce onslaught forced the leader to the ground, and his men came to his aid even though they were afraid of the mystical sword. Pluck turned on them and when they lifted their swords and maces against her, she swiped across the weapons and cut them in half. The loyalty they had for their leader weakened for fear and the bandits fled, leaving him behind. Matt scurried back to a boulder like a frightened Borough Rat. She leveled her sword on him, controlling the rage screaming to cut him down. Through labored breath and gritted teeth, she questioned, "Who sent you?" "I... I can't tell," Matt quivered out as he put his hands up, shielding himself from the electricity crackling around the sword. "They'll kill me." Her Ghost Panther growl made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as she asked him, "What do you think I'll do to you, Dregg?" Matt uttered, "What are you?" Pluck grew impatient and growled again as she demanded, "Answer my question!" "I will!" he whined. "Don't hurt me." He glanced around and then told her, "Yer right, one of the Kingdoms hired us." "Which one?" Edward demanded as he neared them. "Tell us!" He put a handkerchief to the cut on his neck. Matt started, "It was the—" His brownish eyes widened as he grabbed his chest, gripping a dart that struck him. "No," he gasped. "I wasn't going to tell," Matt screamed. "Crell!" He looked at them for help and realized they couldn't save him, so he shouted at them, "All of ya can go to Crell!" He balled up and muttered, "The pain... Dreggs! A curse on Fletching!" Blood ran from his nose, and then he twitched in agony and died. Melee and Pluck quickly surrounded the Prince to protect him. The old beggar under the Cobalt Oak chuckled, then made the sign of evil by lifting his pinky and pointer finger, and aimed the warning at them. He said, "I can't allow you to gain the answer to that yet." He stood, holding a small blowgun in his other hand. Melee charged him as he yelled, "By Fletching! I'll wipe that smile from your grubby face." The beggar laughed again as his demeanor transformed from a pitiful poor man to a venomous warlock as he spoke, "Fools..." His appearance changed along with his clothes as his gray hair grew and transformed into a wolf's head headdress. His dull blue eyes turned dark as midnight, his rotten teeth to gleaming fangs, a wolf's fur robe replaced his rags, and a long, pointed, inky-black goatee sprouted from his chin. He told them, "You cannot harm me." He turned before Melee reached him and disappeared into the oak like a ghost. "Witchcraft!" Edward spat, enraged he wouldn't have his answer. "Which of the Kingdoms would use the forbidden arts?" He scratched his chin and then questioned, "Was he a Necrom?" "I don't know, my lord," Melee replied as he returned to his side. "But we better venture back to the Breakneck. I am still concerned about your safety so far out here from the others." He and the Prince headed for the horses as Pluck stared at the Cobalt Oak. She didn't think he was a Necrom. He didn't have the appearance of the cat-like creatures. He looked human. The warlock didn't look like her at all, but he did use magic. Being a wielder of the dark arts, could he know what she was? This assumption frightened her. What if he told the others before she had a chance to? Her lips quivered in the shadow of her hood. What if the others cast her out? She bit her lip, watching the Prince as she muttered, "What if Edward forsakes me?"

Chapter Five

The Initiation

Han paced the deck of the Breakneck as he shouted, "Fass! I should have sent more men with you." He glanced at the Prince and then to Melee and Pluck as the ocean lapped at the docked ship and a few Gray Gulls cried in the distance. "You should have my command for this." "Nonsense," Edward replied. "Consider this... If we had taken more men, the bandits might have waited for another opportunity, and then we would not know one of the Five Kingdoms is using a Necrom." "Fairy tales!" Von declared, overhearing their conversation from the gangplank. "There's no such thing." "Yes, but..." Han started as he grabbed the railing of the ship and looked at the port of Pass. "They did see the beggar vanish. Perhaps there's sorcery at work and since magic exists, then Necroms could also." Von shook his head in disbelief and threw his Jewel Apple over the side before he said, "I still say they are merely stories... ones told to frighten children into staying out of the woods." He considered that magic may exist, but the Necroms couldn't. If they did, that would mean the old stories were true and that would mean there could be another Great War. His reasoning frightened him as he considered this time they might not escape with their lives if another war ensued. Edward put his hand to his chin as he spoke, "Whoever is using the dark arts does not want us to know. They killed the bandits' leader to prevent him from revealing their identity, and what I saw was no beast but a man. We all have heard that Necroms are cat-like monsters." "Still..." Han started as he couldn't get past his failure. "I shouldn't have let you go with only two guards." Edward put his hand to the old High Guard's shoulder as he told him, "Han, I was in capable hands with Melee and Pluck." "Actually," Melee spoke up. "Pluck's the one who saved us with that enchanted sword of his." "Enchanted..?" Han repeated as he approached her, and then he questioned, "What is he talking about?" A salty breeze swept across the ship and blew against Pluck's cloak as she shamefully thought more of the Accolade Sword. "My rapier broke during battle," she told him as she showed him the severed blade. "I've been dishonored." "To have the blade break during a fight is no dishonor," Han told her as he took the weapon. "Only if it's stripped." He turned to Ardor and ordered, "We shall give you another." "He does not need it," Edward said, talking of Pluck. "The weapon he acquired from the trader is far more superior, therefore, a Sword of Honor." "I saw it strike like lightning," Melee added. "It cut through the bandits' weapons like a sickle through grass." "What weapon?" Han asked. Pluck unstrapped the sword from her back and showed him. Han took the black scabbard, looked the weapon over, and tried to remove the sword as Ardor watched. "Blasted!" Han yelled as his face reddened with the effort. "It won't budge." "Allow me," Ardor said, and then he tried. "Crell! I also can't draw the blade." Frustrated he couldn't do something so simple, he handed it to Pluck and ordered, "You do it!" She hesitated, but then took the Lux, and drew it. The unsheathing sounded like thunder, and the blade glowed lightning-white. "Witchcraft!" Ardor spat as he stepped back from the crackling blade. "We should toss him and the weapon overboard." He drew his rapier as he wondered if the sword was a weapon of the Necroms. Captain Brine and a few sailors murmured their agreement, and then Brine said, "Aye, evil shall befall this ship if we allow the sword to stay." Their accusation appalled Pluck, and she readied herself for a fight. Before Han could challenge Ardor, the Prince commanded, "No!" His face reddened with

rage as he said, "I would be in the hands of my enemy if it was not for Pluck's sword." He stepped to the taller man and questioned him, "Are you saying we should throw over everyone who possesses an item of magic?" "Yes!" Ardor answered without thinking. Han cringed, not knowing how the Prince would react. "Then I should be the first to walk the plank," Edward spoke as he pointed toward the cabins. "Do not forget I possess the Mystic Rose." Ardor's enraged face softened to shock and embarrassment as he started, "My lord, I did not mean—" "Let us drop this matter then," the Prince interrupted. Ardor tightened his jaw as he sheathed his rapier, and then he said, "The matter is dropped." He glanced at Pluck with a look that said he would only drop it for the moment. Han walked to Pluck, leaned to her hood, and said, "Maybe it's best you leave and let Ardor manage his temper." She nodded, placed her sword back in its scabbard, and headed below. Ardor disliked her since she came on board. She didn't understand why he hated her or what she had done to bring about such disdain.

Back on deck...

"What should our next move be?" Han asked, moved to Ardor, and patted the Second on the back, reassuring him. Ardor remained silent as he managed his temper and his tongue. What a fool he was? Him accusing the Prince could cost Ardor his command. Edward walked to the railing and answered the commander, "The only thing we can do for now is—" he spoke as he scanned the open sea and said, "—set sail for the Morgog Kingdom, retrieve my wife, and head for the Isle of Kismet."

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Earlier that sun's cycle...

Fracas stood, grabbed his longbow from the tavern's table, and said, "Sinew... Parry... It's time we left." He insisted, "We must return to the Breakneck." Parry grabbed a barmaid, whirled her around, sat her on his lap, and replied, "A few moments more, my friend." He twirled his finger in her long brown hair and whispered into her ear. She giggled, stroked his blond goatee, and told him, "I can't till mi shift's over." Sinew smoothed his hand over his shaven head and lifted his mug as he barked, "Another!" "No! You're already drunk," Fracas told him as he swung his bow and knocked the mug from the smaller man's grasp. "Let's go while you can still walk." "I'm not drunk," Sinew insisted, swaying on the bench, and then he stared at his throbbing knuckles. "Phraggs! That hurt!" Fracas threw up his hands and uttered, "Fine!" He stomped to the exit, paused, and looked back to see if his two friends were watching. They weren't, so he stepped outside. He would show them. Fracas cleared his throat and shouted, "High Guards! To arms!" Parry stood, dumping the barmaid to the floor, and then he drew his sword, searched the tavern, and asked, "Where's my blade needed?" Sinew barely got to his feet and slurred, "I have your back." He twisted his thin black mustache, reached for his weapon, and fell drunk to the floor. "Get up!" Parry shouted. "Our enemy is upon us!" He nudged the smaller man with his foot as he yelled, "Get up!" Sinew moaned, rolled over, and started snoring. Fracas walked back into the tavern, laughing and said, "If you're the elite of the High Guards, it's a wonder the Fletching Kingdom hasn't fallen." Parry's eyes flashed with rage as he exclaimed, "What the Crell?" He charged the Head Archer ready to strike and shouted, "Why you dirty Borough Rat!" "Now old friend..." Fracas started and then fled, running around the tavern with an ox of a man pursuing

him. "I was trying to prove my point." Parry finally cornered him and then asked, "Do you think this was funny?" Fracas took a moment, considering his answer and replied, "Yes." Parry raised his sword as a grin appeared on his face, and then he said, "You're right." He lowered the rapier and told him, "Come, my friend, let's get Sinew and return to the Breakneck. There shall be time for women another sun's cycle."

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At the docks, Parry dunked Sinew's head into a rain barrel several times. "Enough!" Sinew yelled as he freed himself from the blond man's grip as water dripped from him. "I'm sober." "Perhaps. Stand on one foot and touch your nose." Sinew tried but couldn't, and then he questioned, "What does that prove? I couldn't do that even when I was sober." Parry laughed, and then he said, "I wanted to see if you would try." Sinew punched his arm as he grumbled, "Blond Ox, why don't you pick on someone your own size?" He laughed some more, and then he replied, "If I did that, I'd have no one to pick on." Fracas bought a Jewel Apple from a peddler, bit into the amber fruit, and stated, "Look, the Prince has returned." He continued up the docks and boarded the ship. Parry and Sinew bought Sun Oranges from the peddler. "What do you think is going on?" Sinew asked as he motioned to the Breakneck with his orange. "The discussion seems heated." Parry shaded his eyes from the high sun and then answered, "Perhaps something has happened." He finished peeling his fruit, took a bite of the juicy yellow flesh, and then said, "Look... Ardor and Pluck have drawn their weapons. Could Pluck have challenged his position?" Sinew squinted and twisted his mustache as he spoke, "Perhaps... but then the Prince would not step in." He finished his orange and started peeling another. "Now Pluck is heading below. That was most odd." "Is Pluck on duty tonight?" Parry asked with a hint of mischief in his blue eyes. "No. Why?" Sinew questioned, and then he recognized the look on his friend's face. "What trouble are you planning?" An expression of devilment appeared on the large man's face as he replied, "We have yet to initiate this High Guard from the North. Tonight, we shall use the Night Prowlers Raid."

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That evening...

Parry, Sinew, and Fracas snuck below deck. Parry carried a large potato sack meant to throw over Pluck. "This is Han's cabin," Parry whispered. "Are you sure Han and Ardor aren't within?" Fracas asked as he scanned the corridor and stroked his pointed red beard. "Yes, we don't want to be caught," Sinew spoke up. "I am sure," Parry answered. "Do you two know what you must do?" "I watch the hall," Fracas said, turned, and leaned against the wall. "I grab Pluck's legs after you throw the sack over him," Sinew spoke as he put his hand to Parry's back ready to rush in. Bulwark walked by, and they froze until he went up on deck. The older High Guard mumbled, "Up to no good again?" They didn't answer, holding their breaths as if it would make them invisible. The door shut behind Bulwark, and they exhaled. "Where were we?" Fracas asked, checking to make sure no one else approached. "Ready to rush in, so go, Parry," Sinew said as he ribbed him. "Hey... watch it, little man," Parry threatened with a whisper. "Now once we have Pluck, we shall sneak him up on deck and tie him to a mast." "And if he doesn't go quietly?" Fracas asked. Parry made a fist and answered, "A little knock to the head shouldn't hurt him." They rushed into Han's room.

A few mites earlier...

Pluck slept in the upper bunk until she heard three men talking in the hall. They whispered but with her keen senses, she heard their conversation. "They want to snatch me, huh?" Pluck muttered to herself as she grabbed her cloak, threw it on, and quietly climbed down to the floor. The cabin was pitch dark but that didn't hinder her sight. Pluck found her boots and gloves and searched the locker at the foot of the bunk. What kind of game were they playing? She found rope underneath the bunks. Maybe one she could turn on them. Pluck scurried into the rafters ready to pounce as her tail twitched with excitement underneath her cloak. Parry crept in along with Sinew who held a lantern. He motioned for the smaller man to go to the end of the upper bunk. On his signal, both men grabbed for Pluck, but she wasn't there. "Where is he?" Sinew asked as he searched the cabin with his light. "I am here," Pluck answered. Sinew lifted the lantern as she leapt upon them, and both men screamed.

The next morning...

Bulwark walked up on deck, starting his rounds when something caught his eye. Fracas, Sinew, and Parry were gagged and tied to a mast. He walked to them and stated, "I see the Initiation did not go to your liking." The three men yelled at him through their gags. "I am sorry, but I don't understand you," he told them, and then he looked around. "As much as I would like to stay and chat, I have rounds to walk." The three men yelled after him as Bulwark left, and he told them, "You should be thankful Pluck didn't strip you naked and hang you upside down." He added, "I would have."

Chapter Six

Memories

Breakneck left the Port of Pass, setting sail for the Morgog Kingdom. Everyone was uneasy with magic on the wind, and no one dared mention Necroms or the dark arts. It was well into the third sun's cycle as the ships pushed along at a good speed. Pluck followed the Prince to his cabin, noticed Bulwark posted outside, and wondered why the old High Guard was guarding the Prince's room. Edward went into his cabin, and Pluck stopped in the hall. A yellow glow caught her eye, and she noticed it wasn't from lamps for none lit the room. In the middle of the cabin, a glass-domed case hung and within it, the Mystic Rose hovered as white sparkles swirled around it. It was the Mystic Rose. Two feelings wrestled with her heart. One was of hope that her curse would be ended, and the other was of dread that she would remain in her enchanted form. The magic bloom called to her, so Pluck stepped into the Prince's room and hesitated, remembering her place. Bulwark glanced at her, wondering what the Northern High Guard was doing. Edward noticed the High Guard's curiosity and told Pluck, "It is fine. Come in and see. Close the door behind you," Edward ordered as he flopped on his bed, unbuckled his sword frog, and let the belt and scabbard drop to the floor. Weariness covered his face as he loosened his gold silk sash. Pluck, drawn by the Mystic Rose, walked to the glass dome. The container swayed with the

motion of the ship, but the movement of the case didn't affect the Mystic Rose's levitation. The Mystic Rose stayed suspended in its housing as sparkles spiraled around its petals. Her heart pounded like an infantry drum the closer she drew. All the emotions concerning her curse and the redemption she desired overwhelmed Pluck and watered her eyes. The Mystic Rose's yellow petals transformed to blue, casting an azure glow, and the Prince noticed the flower's hue change and said, "I do not know why the Mystic Rose alters colors." Edward stared at the Mystic Rose as he continued, "I had it brought here from the ship's hold. It was under guard there. I thought it might be safer hidden but..." He sighed again and added, "I have grown so accustomed to its presence, I cannot sleep unless the Mystic Rose is in the room. I think it has bewitched me." The power tugging her toward the Mystic Rose grew stronger and enchanted her. She raised her gloved hand toward the case as if to clasp the flower. Her tattooed finger throbbed as the Mystic Rose pulsed with magical energy and this rhythmic vim hit the glass-domed case, shaking it with charged electrical force. She turned her back to the Prince and removed her glove, seeing her tattoo. The four black rings on her bare finger glowed silver as the Mystic Rose's blue petals transformed to platinum, increasing its throbbing tempo. A surge of energy shot from the Mystic Rose like a ball of lightning. The power cracked the glass and shattered it, releasing the energy into the room and filled the cabin with crackling electricity. Pluck covered her eyes as glass flew, and then she stepped back, frightened by the surge. The more she retreated the less the Mystic Rose pulsed and soon the electrical ball faded, returning the cabin to a dark room cast in an azure glow. Pluck looked at the silver rings and remembered the last thing Fairah had told her.

"These marks on ye's finger, they are more than tattoos. They are ye's connection to the Mystic Rose. It chose ye, remember that."

Edward sat up as the container shattered and exclaimed, "By Fletching!" He neared the Mystic Rose and turned to Pluck as his brow wrinkled with bewilderment as he questioned, "What did you do?" The glass, that had scattered about the room, glowed and lifted and gathered around the Mystic Rose. Each shard found its place and pieced together the dome until it reformed. A bright light shot from the container, and the glow faded. The glass-domed case magically became whole again as if it had never been broken. Edward couldn't believe his eyes as he looked back to Pluck. He saw the furry top of her hand and the glowing markings on her bare finger before they returned to black. He grabbed her hand and his touch startled her, so she pulled away. "That tattoo..." he started as he pointed at her finger. "I remember those markings." Terrible memories flooded his mind as he grabbed his head and said, "I was a boy... I went into this temple and found the Mystic Rose. I was not alone. A girl was with me and her name..." His blue eyes widened with realization as he uttered, "Her name was Pluck!" He stepped back as he accused, "You are a woman!" She raised her hand, trying to quiet him as she spoke softly, "Please, my lord, lower your voice." "But how can you be a High Guard?" Edward yelled as he shook his head. "Women are not allowed!" "My prince, is everything all right?" Bulwark asked from the corridor. "Yes! You are not needed!" Edward yelled, and then he scolded Pluck, "Women cannot possess weapons. It is forbidden. You shall go in front of the Inquiry." He paced the room and said, "I do not understand how Han could have allowed such a thing." A new memory interrupted his thoughts, so he glanced at her furry hand and spoke, "Something else happened that sun's cycle in the temple." He noticed her fingers had no nails and grabbed her hand and examined her thumb. It and her other fingers had a slit down the middle like a cat. "A memory I had forgotten." He

pushed the flap of skin aside and found a claw, and he released her, appalled by his findings as he uttered, "Something horrible. A witch... She cast a spell intended for me but..." He couldn't finish the sentence so plagued by a past he had forgotten. The more he berated her, the more Pluck grew angry, and she finally yelled at him, "You're still an ungrateful spoiled brat!" She tapped her chest as she said, "I pushed you out of the way. I protected you!" He fell silent. Never had anyone yelled at him in such a way especially a woman so in a calmer tone, he said, "Yes, I remember." The incident he had buried long ago surfaced, and he spoke, "You saved me by taking my place." His face softened as he added, "You were turned into a hideous monster." Pluck said nothing. She needed no reminder. His shame turned to anger as he shouted, "You are not deformed! You are cursed!" It didn't matter to him that she took his place. He was the Prince and she was a peasant. "That is why you cannot show your face." Pluck nodded. He knew her secret, and now her life depended on what he would do with it. He had to see, so Edward commanded, "Show me your face." She hesitated, fearing how he would react once he saw her again. "Shall I order Bulwark in here to do it for you?" He was nothing like she remembered. Edward was cruel. "There's no need, my lord," Pluck told him as her fear turned to terror, and then she pulled back her hood. Edward gasped, "By Fletching! You are a beast! A Necrom!" Another fact frightened him. The Prince had seen this creature with short beige fur before, so he pointed his finger and accused her, "Fass! You are the hideous monster from my dream. You... you are the one slaughtering the men." Terror paled his face as he shouted, "You are the reaper of my nightmares!" He stumbled back to his bed and fell upon it as he exclaimed, "You have come to take me!" Pluck just stood there. She didn't know what to say or do. The moment hadn't gone like she envisioned. Edward wasn't grateful for her sacrifice. Her fears had come true. He rejected her and now there was no way she could ever ask him for the Kiss. Pluck pulled her hood up to cover her shame and wondered where she could hide. She didn't know. She just had to get out of his presence. She said, "My lord, I will await my arrest at the bow." She left, trying not to run as she bit her lip to fight back tears. Edward didn't know how to react as he rushed into the hall and then watched her walk away in a hurry. What he had seen in the cabin wasn't a vicious monster bent on his destruction, not at all. The creature, who had raced from his cabin near tears, had been deeply wounded by his words. The only monster in the cabin had been him. "Is there a problem, my lord?" Bulwark asked as Melee arrived. Edward didn't answer him only stated, "I need to speak with Han."

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"I still do not understand why you trained her to become a High Guard!" Edward yelled as he paced Han's cabin. "Fass! Do you know the fine even for a man of your status?" "Yes, I do," Han replied as he picked up a small wooden chest, placed it on his bed, and opened the box. "Fifty pieces of gold. It took me ten seasons to collect these wages." Edward looked at the payment and then to Han as he exclaimed, "You knew all along she would be caught?" "Pluck being a woman isn't what we were hiding," Han told him as he searched the Prince's face. "What should I have done? Abandon her at the temple? Never... Do you realize the curse she has endured for protecting you?" Han carefully considered his next words, and then he said, "You see, I thought the others would accept her as a High Guard even after finding out she is a beast. What other position could she have in this world as a Necrom?" Edward's face flushed with anger as he questioned, "Why did you never tell me?" "You had forgotten her and the witch," Han explained

as he walked to a small cabinet and poured them a mug of wine. "I thought it best not to bring them up until you were ready." Aggravated by the whole thing, Edward raked his hand through his shoulder-length raven-black hair and then asked, "Now what would you have me do?" "You are the Prince and soon to be Emperor... What can you not do?" Edward took the mug and downed the wine. "I do not mean for you to feel guilty, but she's the way she is because of you," Han spoke as he offered the Prince more. "You at least owe Pluck her life and the freedom to live it." Edward lifted his mug, and the High Guard poured him more, and then Edward said, "Perhaps, but I still feel she wants something from me." He shivered before he continued, "There is something about the way she looks at me." Han nodded, took another drink, and stated, "She does. There's a way to end her curse, but she hasn't told me. All I know is that it involves you. She wants to end her misery." He set down the mug and asked, "What have you decided, my lord?" Edward drank half of his bitter wine and replied, "She may remain free, but I do not want her as my personal guard." Han knew that would resolve nothing, so he told him, "It might be best that she does remain. Her abilities are exceptional, she does possess the Lux and with an unknown enemy after you, she should remain by your side." "Phraggs!" Edward uttered and reluctantly answered, "Fine!" "What shall you tell the men, my lord?" Edward answered, "Nothing for now. Pluck may keep her secret until she feels she can reveal it."

Chapter Seven

The Fourth Sun's Cycle at Sea

Nearly a zoc away from Breakneck and Waterswift, a storm approached and darkened the sky. Lightning streaked across the horizon like the silent claws of a Desert Eagle. The bolts lit up the distant sea as Pluck stood at the bow, watching the flashes. She stared at her bare fingers for a while before slipping on her glove as she wondered what they would do to her. The wind pushed her hood off and swept through her fiery-crimson mane as waves crashed against the bow, spraying mist. She shivered in the cool salty air as she muttered, "I could throw myself into the sea and save everyone the trouble. No... I'm not one to give up. If they want me..." She grabbed the strap that held the Lux's scabbard to her back and declared, "They'll have to take me." Her cat ears twitched back as she heard them come, and she prepared herself for a fight. The Prince approached with Melee, so she pulled her hood on as her heart sank. Pluck reached for her hilt and saw Han behind them and knew with him there they wouldn't kill her, so she lowered her hand. The worse they would do was throw her in the brig. Edward stopped just short of her, put his hands behind his back, looked down at her, and said, "I have considered your situation..." Her heart sped. What about her situation? She glanced at the Prince's bodyguard. Melee looked puzzled like he wasn't sure why they were there. Han remained silent, but his face reassured her everything would be fine. "I... No, Han..." Edward spoke awkwardly. "Han has convinced me to keep you as my personal guard against my better judgment." He diverted his gaze, unsure if he was making the right decision as he continued, "We shall see how things go." He started to head back and added, "Thank you." Edward didn't face her, and his voice sounded strained like he had to force himself to speak as he said, "I thank you for your protection

on Pass Island and in the temple long ago. A debt I hope to repay one sun's cycle." There was a moment of silence, and then he took a deep breath as if to continue, but he didn't. He walked off and set for his cabin. Melee followed even more confused. She looked at Han. Silence found her again except for the waves hitting the ship and the wind whipping their garments. Relieved she still had her life and her freedom, Pluck sighed, feeling ashamed of what she was. "Not what you hoped for I imagine, but it's a beginning," Han told her as he walked to Pluck and put his hand on her shoulder. "There's so much for Edward to accept." She muttered, "As you said, it's a beginning." "Come," Han told her as he scanned the sea. "The storm shall be here soon."

* * *

The storm gave way to a clear morning as seagulls once again filled the sky, indicating they neared land. A sailor in the crow's nest scanned the ocean and spotted a vessel in the distance. "A ship!" he yelled as he pointed off starboard. Captain Brine asked for his telescope. Fracas, Sinew, and Parry walked up on deck, hearing the alarm and squinted in the daylight. "Is it a merchantman or a warship?" Fracas questioned as he stroked his pointed red beard. "A warship by what I can tell," Brine answered the Archer. "She's flying one of the Kingdom's flags." "Which one?" Sinew asked, feeling the tension sweep over the crew as he wiped sweat from his shaven head. "I can't make out. Wait..." Brine said as he strained to see. "I see a Roaring Black Lion." The three High Guards felt relieved as Han came on deck with a few of his men. "I heard we spotted a ship." "Yes," Sinew answered. "She's flying Morgog's flag." "So they've sent a ship to escort us to port," Han stated as he scratched his gray beard. "I wonder if there's been an attempt to abduct Princess Virago." "If not, there's sure to be one," Fracas spoke as he adjusted the quiver on his shoulder. "We should warn them." "Yes..." Ardor said as he joined them on deck. "We should meet with the Princess' advisor and commander of her guards as soon as possible." The ship named Dark Monarch turned and followed the Fletchings toward the port. The High Guards on Breakneck stood along the starboard, swapping glares with the Sentinels who were Morgog's royal army. "This shall be an unstable alliance," Fracas stated as he leaned on his longbow. "Even with the marriage, there shall be strife. There's too much blood between us." "Aye," an old sailor agreed. "They sank the Sea Wind in the battle of Coral Point, during the last rush to crown an Emperor. My brother went down with her." He spat on the deck as he cursed, "Foul scalawags, I'll never trust 'em." Parry cracked his massive knuckles as he added, "I'm up to giving the scamps a good thrashing." "There shall be no trouble from our side," Han warned as he eyed each of them especially the Blond Ox. "Am I understood?" "Yes, commander," the High Guards replied. As Han walked off, Parry whispered, "We shall not start it, but we shall end it."

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Pluck carried a tray of cheese, bread, oranges, and wine to the Prince's cabin. Melee and Von stood without. She knocked and entered at Edward's command. "Here's your meal, my lord," Pluck stated as she noticed the Mystic Rose still cast an azure glow. She thought it was best if she stayed far away from the flower. Pluck set the tray in front of the Prince. "I am not hungry. Take the food away," Edward ordered as he dipped a quill in an inkwell and wrote on parchment. The high sun shone in from an open window behind him. "I'll leave it in case you get hungry, my lord," Pluck said as she stepped from his desk and folded her arms behind her back. He looked up from

his work and said in a stern tone, "I said take it away. Do not make me regret my decision to let you remain as my personal guard." She nodded, picked up the tray, and wondered how she could ask him. Edward continued writing, looked at her again, and questioned, "Why are you still here?" Pluck stared at the Sun Oranges as she started, "I was wondering..." He tightened his jaw, annoyed by the disruption to his writing. He had until they docked to finish his work, and he never would with her staring at him. Edward asked, "What were you wondering?" She hesitated and then answered, "Do you remember the time when your cousins came to the castle for a visit?" He stared at his work as he replied, "Yes, why do you ask?" "Remember how they treated me? How they teased me and pinched my arm till I cried?" Edward's thoughts drifted back to that time. The girl, what Pluck was known as before Han named her, had just arrived at the castle. She was nearly six and he eight. He didn't think much of the peasant with brown hair and brown eyes and wasn't sure why his mother the Queen sent for her. "Why did you pick a girl to be my playmate and a toddler at that?" he demanded, turned from his mother, and pouted. "I am nearly a man. I should have men to play with not—" "She shall be a loyal friend," Queen Jezebel informed him as she nudged the girl closer to him. "And she shall keep you out of trouble. A prince should not get into trouble. It is not befitting your crown." She left the girl, walked to him, and turned Edward to face her as she told him, "The girl is so desperate for love. She shall give you her heart, and you need do nothing for it." He looked into his mother's blue eyes as he said, "But she is a peasant." "Yes, and you must always remember that and remind her," Jezebel instructed her son. "She is well versed in games, and she shall attend lessons with you." The Queen lifted his chin and said to him, "My son, give her some time. If you still do not wish to have her, then I shall send her back." He told his mother, "I shall give her a chance." Sun's cycles then weeks went by, and Edward grew to like having the girl around to play games and go on adventures. One of his favorites was saving the damsel from the dragon, of course, the girl had to play both the maiden and the monster. As summer grew to an end, his cousins from his mother's side came to visit. The first sun's cycle was exciting. They played High Guards and the girl was a Necrom the feared monster of magic. All was fun and laughter until his cousins knocked the girl to the ground and started pinching her arms. "We have the Necrom now," Philip the elder of the two declared. "Yes, now the monster must pay for all its evil crimes," Andrew added. "Stop it!" she pleaded. "Don't hurt me!" She looked at the Prince and called for him, "Edward, help me!" "Silence your pleas, peasant. The Prince shall not come to your aid," Philip told her as he continued to pinch her as red marks appeared on her arms. "Royal blood does not flow through your veins." "Yes, quiet your crying," Andrew added as he kicked dirt on her. "You should learn your life is worthless." Tears ran down her face as she looked at the Prince. Edward stood there, clenching his wooden sword, not understanding the feelings affecting his body. Why didn't he join in with them? Why did his face burn? The Prince realized he felt outraged and clenched his teeth, remembering something he heard Han tell his men. Edward lifted his sword and charged the cousins as he shouted, "Are we not honorable men?" He caught them off guard and pushed them to the ground. The cousins looked up at him stunned. Edward pointed his sword at them and told them, "High Guards do all things to glorify the Creator. We pledge loyalty to the crown. We swear to protect the Fletching people and property and above all, we forfeit our lives for the Royal Family." He glared at them as he declared, "You shall not hurt any of my people!" The cousins whimpered. "We did not realize you liked her," they declared. "Please," they cowered. "Let us make our apologies." Edward nodded, and the cousins helped the girl to her feet and

brushed dirt from her plain dress. That sun's cycle, Pluck saw Edward anew. She fell in love with him. He had saved her. Pluck continued to hold the tray of food as she wondered if he would save her now from her curse. Edward thought of that time differently. It was a moment of weakness, a childish whim, and an action he didn't wish to remember. The Prince laid his quill down and started, "Yes, I remember that sun's cycle. What of it?" "That was the first sun's cycle I realized I..." She couldn't say it, not love... not to him, so she told him, "I gained a new respect for you." Her ears twitched forward under her hood and her feline eyes narrowed. "I wanted you to know you'll always have my loyalty." "As I should. You are a High Guard, my vassal," he told her as he picked up the quill and dipped it in the well. "Now please take the food away." A shadow cast into the room as Edward set his quill to the parchment. He heard Pluck growl and saw her face wrinkle with rage in the darkness of her hood. She lifted the tray and threw the food across the room. "Insolent wench!" Edward uttered as he stood and slammed his hands on the desk. "What do you think—" She rushed around the desk and pushed him aside as she yelled, "To arms!" She forced him to a side wall as she covered the Prince with her body. Melee and Von rushed in swords drawn. "What are you doing?" Edward demanded, feeling her warm body pressed against his. She smelled of the forest and of leather. "Remain, my lord," Pluck ordered. Melee rushed to the window as Von ran up to the deck. "He's gone," Melee told them. Pluck moved from the Prince as she told Melee, "We can't let him jump ship." She set the tray on the desk as she added, "But first, we must get the Prince to a secure room." "Agreed," Melee said as he headed for the hall. "Han's cabin has no windows." Edward moved to the middle of the room as he questioned, "Who is gone? And why can we not let him escape?" He glanced at the table, saw the tray with an arrow embedded in it, and noticed a rope dangling outside the window, and then he questioned, "What happened?" "There was an attempt on your life, my lord," Pluck told him as she grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the door. "We must get you into a secure room till the assassin's caught." Her hand was also warm and held his firm and for some reason, he felt safe with her. She and Melee took Edward to Han's cabin and waited, and soon a knock came to the door. "Who is it?" Melee demanded. "Ardor, it is safe. We caught the attacker." Melee looked at Pluck, she nodded, and he opened the door. Ardor stepped in and said, "Come, my lord. He's on deck."

On deck, many High Guards surrounded the bound man. Edward examined the man but didn't recognize him. Many soldiers served in his army. He asked, "Who is he?" "One of Fracas' Archers," Ardor answered. "One of our own?" Edward uttered, surprised. "Perhaps a spy planted long ago," Han said as he shook his head, disgusted, and addressed the prisoner, "Are there more among us?" The traitor didn't answer. "Who do you work for?" Edward demanded. The man replied, "The one you suspect the least, and that's all you'll get out of me, Fletching mongrel." Ardor raised his hand to strike the man. "No, take him below," Edward ordered. "We shall get nothing from him. We shall have the Morgog's deal with him once we land."

Chapter Eight

Princess Virago

"Princess, please come out," a fair-haired Lady Flaxen beckoned. "Prince Edward shall be here soon. Please, we must dress you for the ceremony." "No!" Virago screamed as she remained in her locked room, stroking her long ebony hair. She wore a flame-colored dress. "I do not wish to marry the Cretin of Fletching." "You do not know if he is a clod," Flaxen said as she bit her lip in desperation. Her hair was pulled back in long braids. "I heard he is handsome." The Princess' room lay in shambles from an earlier tantrum. Dresses, jewelry, combs, brushes, and other small objects laid scattered about. Virago said, "I have had enough of people telling me what I am to do." She sat in the middle of the floor, clinging to her bedpost, face wet with tears as she yelled, "You are my lady in waiting... so wait!" The thin man, standing behind Flaxen, moved to the door and beckoned to her, "Dear Princess, please..." Lord Caliber leaned on his staff with an engraved wolf-head as he said, "Your kingdom is depending on you. Think of all the wealth and power you shall gain when you have the authority to make laws and judge the Five Kingdoms." Virago didn't answer. Lord Caliber massaged his temple and tried again, telling her, "Your father, King Elan, arranged this marriage long ago. You shall dishonor him if you do not follow through." He glanced at Flaxen, straightened his red robe's gray-black fur trim, faced the door, and asked, "What about your mother?" "Leave her out of this," Virago demanded. "Why can you not leave the dead alone?" Flaxen put a hand on the thin man's shoulder, shook her head, and told him, "That is not the way. For the Princess' Advisor, you are wise in many things, but you do not know how to deal with matters of the heart." She smoothed her hand down her fiery-yellow dress, bit her lip thinking, and said, "There is only one thing that may lure her out, but I do not know if it shall work." "Try it," Lord Caliber urged as he stroked his long inky-black goatee. "The navy is escorting the Prince's ships into port. We do not have much time." Flaxen cleared her throat, praying to the Creator that this would work and said, "Edward shall have presents." "Presents?" Virago repeated as she perked up, moved to her door, leaned on its frame, and raked her ebony bangs from her blue eyes. "Yes, many and costly." Lord Caliber jumped at the opportunity and added, "Edward shall surely turn back if he hears you have called off the wedding. He shall take all his presents with him." "No presents," Virago said, thought about it, then unlocked her door, and ordered, "Do not just stand there, dress me." She wiped her eyes and blew her nose on the handkerchief Flaxen offered as she said, "We do not want to keep my husband waiting."

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Breakneck and Waterswift docked at Stalwart Port while the Dark Monarch anchored in the bay. The Prince with Han, Ardor, Melee, Pluck, Fracas, Sinew, and Parry unloaded their horses and rode to the castle with a Morgog escort while the rest of the High Guards stayed on the ships. "I've never seen a Sentinel before today," Fracas admitted. "Look at the black leather armor they wear. It must be hot and heavy." "They say their armor's hardened by the Fires of Morgog," Sinew said. "That the capitol's centered around these fire geysers and since the foundation of the Kingdom, the flames have yet to cease their blazing." Parry laughed and then

spoke, "They also say their armor is the strongest in the world." He tapped the top of his silver hilt as he said, "I have yet to see armor my blade couldn't penetrate." They rode past a Sentinel sharpening his sword. "Interesting piece of weaponry, isn't it?" Sinew asked as he pointed to the large sword with a wavy blade. "It's a Flamberge, and it was first created to cut down cavalry and also boasted to be hardened by the Fires of Morgog." Parry glanced at the large sword as he spoke, "Impressive, yes, but heavy and slow in battle. What else do we know about them?" "Their royal army the Sentinels consist of three groups; Bowman, Footsoldiers, and Cavalry," Fracas replied. "I would enjoy pitting my Archers against their Bowmen in a shooting contest." Parry flexed his massive biceps as he said, "I wouldn't mind wrestling with a few of them." Four Sentinels glared at them. "Move along," Han commanded, and then he added, warning them, "Quietly."

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The Princess stood along with her lady in the center of the Capital. Virago wore her red-flare colored wedding dress as the Fires of Morgog erupted around them, illuminating the sandstone canyon. A distance behind them, the Morgog Castle stood and in front of the castle, the Great Cathedral stood. Virago stared at the flaming geysers in front of her. The lady had been quiet a long time, allowing her princess to deal with whatever matters needed to be dealt with, and then Flaxen finally said, "It is time." The Princess closed her eyes, opened them, and spoke, "I am ready. This was the last place I wanted to see before we left Morgog. I wanted to burn the images of my homeland into my mind. I do not ever want to forget them." "Princess, you can return someday." Virago questioned, "Why do I fear I shall not?" Lord Caliber entered and walked across the cobblestone path as his wolf-head staff clinked across the hard surface. He looked at the flaming geysers as he stated, "I knew you would be here." Irritated her remembering was interrupted, she asked, "Did my father send you?" "No, King Elan did not. Actually, I wanted to talk to you before the ceremony," he replied as he shifted the staff to his other hand and placed his palm on the Princess' shoulder. "A great responsibility has been given to you. For so long, Morgog has fallen from grace. It has fallen from the power it should hold. We need to return it to its Golden Age." "I understand my responsibilities. I also know what I am giving up," she said and then walked away from the lord. "What I do not know is what I am placing myself into? Our people have always been an enemy of the Fletchings and now we are forming an alliance. This was thrown together in such great haste. There shall be power struggles from both sides. For one, who shall be in charge of the army? We have our Commander Avarice, and they have theirs." "I understand how you feel about the Fletchings. They are not our equals, but your father has made up his mind and as for the rest of your questions, do not fret over them," he said as he winked at her. "They shall work themselves out." Lord Caliber turned and left where he came in as he spoke to her, "Come, your wedding is about to begin." Flaxen walked up beside the Princess and told her, "I feel so uneasy around him. Do not get me wrong. He is a very good advisor." Virago watched the lord as he left, and she then said, "I think you worry too much."

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Within a nal, Edward and his escort arrived at the Capital and were led to the Great Cathedral. There Princess Virago, dressed in her red flare wedding gown, waited before a priest. Flutes played a flowing melody as the Fletchings entered. "I have never seen a wedding so hurried," Ardor commented as fiery-yellow robes were given to each of them. "Do you think any of the other Five Kingdoms are waiting for a courtship to bloom before their marriages?" Han asked. Ardor shook his head. Pluck watched the Prince as his face paled, and she heard with her keen ears his breathing and heartbeat increase. Edward looked ahead, saw the priest and the veiled woman, and questioned, "Is that her?" He swallowed hard, but it didn't phase his dry mouth. "I could use some wine." The more he thought about his wedding, the sicker he got. Many things rampaged through his mind as he wondered what she looked like and why she was wearing a veil. He considered she was hideous, and then a more horrifying thought crossed his mind. What if she looked like Pluck? He repeated, "I could use some wine." "Not now, my lord," Han said as the group moved forward in a wedding march in sync with the flute music. "There shall be plenty of time for wine later." Edward rubbed his hands as he whispered, "I cannot see her." He asked, "What does the Princess look like?" "Quiet," Han commanded. "Now is not the time." "I feel ill," Edward said as he stopped and held his stomach. A few people seated in the pews murmured. Han nodded to Ardor, and then each of them grabbed the Prince's arm as Han said, "The ceremony shall be over soon, my lord." They moved forward, and Edward's knees weakened the closer they walked to the priest. Princess Virago glanced at Lady Flaxen, and then Virago whispered, "He is handsome, but he is so pale looking. Are you sure he shall have many presents?" "Yes, my lady," Flaxen replied as she looked over the Prince and giggled. "I believe he is nervous." "That or intoxicated," Virago commented. "That would be my lot to marry a lush." "Maybe he is intoxicated by your beauty." Virago glared at her, not that Lady Flaxen could see for the veil. "Oh..." Flaxen uttered as she bit her lip. "Your wedding shroud. He cannot see you." She shrugged and said, "I know I am not the brightest. Please forgive this dim-witted servant." Lord Caliber sat in the front pew next to King Elan and Princess Jasmine, Virago's younger sister. Lord Caliber glanced at the Prince's men as he sensed a supernatural force, and then he leaned to the King and whispered, "Last chance to change your mind. You could choose Commery over Fletching and return Morgog to its Golden Age." "No, my mind is made up," King Elan answered. Lord Caliber said, "As you wish, my lord." "I cannot breathe," Edward said as he gripped Han's robe. "We must stop." Ardor gave Han a worried look. "A little longer, my lord," Han spoke as he hurried their pace. Pluck thought Edward looked as if he'd spew his breakfast. She had her doubts he'd make it through the wedding. The group stopped in front of the priest, and those assembled, quieted. Han and Ardor walked the Prince forward, released, stepped back, and prayed he would stand. The priest motioned for the Princess to move beside the Prince, and reluctantly, she did. The priest cleared his throat, the flute players ceased their playing, and the priest opened his book. "We gather here to witness a joining," the priest started and continued, "One that the Creator has ordained." He looked at the Prince and asked him, "Do you take Virago to be your wife?" Edward swayed, putting his hand to his mouth, looking a little green. The priest took a step back. Han poked the Prince's back with his finger, and Edward straightened, answering, "Yes." The priest shook his head, looked at the Princess, and asked her, "Do you take Edward to be your husband?" She glanced at the pale man, pouted, and then whined, "Yes." Virago turned and cried on Flaxen's shoulder, "Why..? Why..?" Her father stood, but Lord Caliber convinced the King to retake his seat. "There... There..." Flaxen spoke as she stroked the Princess'

hair. "It shall be over soon." The priest rubbed his temple, irritated by the high pitch shrill, and then he said, "Then in the sight of the Creator, you are now husband and wife." He slammed his book shut and said, "You may now kiss her." Pluck gasped inwardly. The Princess couldn't have her kiss. Pluck feared moving as she felt herself pale. She hadn't thought kissing would be involved in this ceremony and after all this time, this blubbery woman was going to receive her redemption. Edward hesitated, stunned and still ill. "Lift her shroud," Han instructed. Edward did and smiled, seeing Virago wasn't a hag like he envisioned. His green coloring faded as he looked over her milky skin, blue eyes, long ebony hair, and a face of an angel. The priest cleared his throat and motioned for the Prince to proceed. Edward leaned to her and then still afflicted by nerves, kissed her on the cheek. Pluck sighed. There was still a chance for her to receive her redemption. Virago and Edward stared at one another, neither sure what to say and then as quickly as they were married, the couple along with their escort were ushered out of the Great Cathedral. Virago to her carriage, and Edward to his horse. Both traveled to the port, and the Princess boarded the Dark Monarch and the Prince the Breakneck, and soon with the Sea Sprite and Waterswift, the four vessels sailed toward the Isle of Kismet.

Chapter Nine

Coblet's Route

"My lord," Captain Brine uttered as he looked up from his desk and stood. "You and your men please enter." He motioned to chairs, noticing the Prince looked peaked. Edward, Han, Ardor, and Melee sat, and then Brine spoke, "As your spies have reported, Swelldom and Hort have a sun's cycle on us. There's only one course we can take to beat them." Brine paused, not sure to even mention it, then pointed to the map on his desk, and stated, "Coblet's Route." "The way no man has ever returned from," Ardor exclaimed as he shuddered. "There must be another." "None," Brine replied as he looked at the Prince. "My men are wary of going this route, but we shall sail it if it's your desire." "As you said Captain, there is no other way. We shall take Coblet's Route. Signal the Waterswift, Dark Monarch, and Sea Sprite to follow," Edward ordered and then stood, swaying with the ship and held his stomach still a little queasy. "I shall be in my cabin." "Aye," Brine said and then stared at the map as the others left. Drawings of sea monsters littered the area around Coblet's Route. He shook his head and mumbled, "Creator, help us." Clear skies abounded as they set on their journey, and the first two sun's cycles were uneventful. Edward took the opportunity to rest and get over the horrible wedding experience. Everyone aboard seemed to enjoy the serenity, but all feared it wouldn't last. The third sun's cycle during the latter part of the high sun, clouds scattered the blue sky. Below deck Pluck slept in her bunk soundly for the first time. She started to dream of a land where she would be accepted, and it was a place that hadn't seen war for hundreds of seasons. Pluck was drawn to this new place, but the dream faded as her body tingled as if it was asleep. A sense of urgency woke her, and she sat up in a panic. Something wasn't right, so Pluck jumped to the floor, wrapped her tail around her waist, grabbed her cloak, threw it on, and clasped it. The tingling persisted, warning of danger, but didn't hinder her movements as Pluck rushed on deck. It was

like magic electrified the air. A seafoam green mist crept over the ships like a looming specter and thickened to fog. Pluck could barely see five steps past the bow as she pulled her cloak close in the cold air. Did the others feel this charge of energy? She walked up to the bridge and there Captain Brine had the wheel as Han and Ardor stood next to him. The captain was talking. "We've entered the barrier that surrounds Coblet's Route. From here, we sail uncharted seas," Brine said, then turned to his first mate, and ordered, "Have them trim the sails. Have two sailors stand at the bow to watch for rocks and shoals. Also if the lanterns will pierce this eerie mist, signal the other ships to do the same." "Aye, captain." The ships traveled on pressed by the current as an eerie stillness abounded. Neither wind nor waves broke the silence and without the sun or stars, no one knew how much time elapsed or what direction they sailed. All they knew was the fog. "I don't like this," Brine spoke as he gripped the wheel. "We've journeyed through this demon vapor far too long. I fear we're off course." "Ardor, go wake the Prince," Han commanded. "There's no telling how long we'll have to travel before we break through. It could be endless," Brine said as he shivered in the nippy sea air. "If we can't tell what direction we're going, we'll venture the way all mariners have who dared trek this route." "There must be some way through," Pluck spoke as she felt the captain's alarm. She heard sailors talk of those lost at sea and didn't wish to meet their fate. Nor did she desire to encounter the monsters told in their tales and as she recounted those myths, the fur on the back of her neck rose. "By Fletching!" Pluck uttered after she heard an eerie sound in the distance, and she said, "Listen..." She lifted her finger to her lips. All but her grim expression was shadowed by her hood. She warned them, "I hear something." Han and Brine strained to listen, and soon they also heard the roar of wind. "What is it?" Han asked. "I don't know," Brine replied. "It could be anything." He imagined the worst and then said, "It sounds like it's nearing us. Wake the ship," he ordered. "There must be a way to pierce this fog so we can see what monstrosity approaches," Pluck stated and then a gush of heat warmed her back in the chill. It wasn't a tingling premonition like before, no this sensation was completely different. It was more physical than metaphysical. "Your sword glows," Han uttered as he pointed at her weapon as it pulsed. Each time the Lux glowed, he saw the blade through the scabbard down to the ancient writings engraved in its steel. She reached up and unsheathed the sword, and it rumbled as the lightning-white blade lit up the ship, casting shadows across their faces. "Witchcraft!" Brine uttered. "Why does the weapon burn?" "I don't know," Pluck answered as she examined the blade, felt an urge to lift it, and did so. Azure lightning shot from the blade, igniting the seafoam-green fog and the vapor parted, forming a corridor as sunlight broke through. A gust hit Brine's back, and he ordered, "Full sails!" The sailors scurried to work, letting the canvases fall to harness the wind's power. The fog lessened to mist, revealing the other ships and together they traveled the corridor, clearing the barrier. As the last of the four ships cleared, the whole fog barrier disappeared like it never existed. Clear seas surrounded them and ahead they saw land. The first mate came on the bridge. "Take the wheel," Brine ordered, and then he removed his telescope. "Does anyone hear that monstrous sound we heard earlier?" Han shook his head as did Pluck. "Perhaps it vanished with the barrier," Han suggested. "Have we arrived at the Isle of Kismet?" Edward asked as he, Ardor, and Melee walked up the steps. "Don't know. I wouldn't think we would be there yet," Brine replied as he handed the telescope to the commander. Han took the instrument, peered into the eyepiece, and said, "I can't tell you any different, my lord. We should anchor in the bay and give the captain enough time to get our bearings with the sextant." He turned to Brine and

questioned him, "What do you think? Is this agreeable?" Brine started, "I think—" "A spout!" a sailor in the crow's nest shouted. Brine held up his hand, shaded his eyes from the sun, and looked at the sailor. The man pointed off their port. "What does he mean a spout?" Edward asked. "He means a waterspout," Brine told him as he searched the seas. "It's an ocean-bound tornado." He spotted the cyclone and exclaimed, "It's coming right for us!" "Another one!" a sailor at the bow shouted. "By Fletching!" Ardor uttered. "How can this be? There's no storm." "Crell!" Brine yelled as he took the wheel. "More witchcraft!" The sea churned as the spouts neared. Brine looked at the Northern High Guard and asked, "Anything in your magic sword to combat these?" Pluck stared at the Lux which had long since stopped glowing, and she replied, "I don't know." "What good is the weapon if you can't harness its power?" Brine questioned as he turned the wheel sharply, trying desperately to avoid the spouts. "Sorcery!" He turned to Han and demanded, "Order him to wield his sword. We can't avoid these things. It's like they're tracking us." Han didn't look at Pluck as he stated, "I have confidence she shall do what she can." She..? Ardor glanced over the Northern High Guard. Did Han speak of the sword? Ardor turned his attention back to the whirling menaces. Pluck lifted the Lux, but the blade remained dormant, so she shook the sword as if to wake it. The closest spout slammed into the Waterswift. They heard sailors and High Guards shouting as they ran from the whirlwind. Even the horses, who were trapped below, screamed for the terror rocking the ship. Pieces of the vessel and men were sucked up into the vortex. The Waterswift tossed and turned as it wrestled with the funnel. The great wind beast prevailed and broke the ship into large pieces, and the spout continued on unhindered by its fight with the Waterswift. The funnel headed for the Sea Sprite as the second spout hit Breakneck, their ship. The vortex stripped planks from the bow like they were paper and sent them flying. Men jumped into the sea to avoid the wind monster. The spout wrestled with the Breakneck and forced it to ram into the Dark Monarch. The force cut a large gash down the side of the Breakneck. In desperation, Pluck lifted her sword and shouted, "Stop!" The spout tore through the middle of the ship as it made its way toward them. Pluck's hood flew back, but no one saw her as they shielded their faces. She barely kept her eyes open in the torrent. "STOP!" she screamed, but the sword remained lifeless. Pluck felt herself being pulled toward the vortex and grabbed the railing of the bridge as did the others. Her fiery-crimson mane whipped about as she covered her eyes with her sword arm before the spout swallowed them.

Chapter Ten

Wellspring

Waves rolled in and washed over a white sandy beach as the sun descended, nearing the western horizon and cast a tangerine glow over the blue-green waters. A jungle laid beyond the beach, bellowing with animals as a small creature emerged from the vegetation. He was a Trife. The rat-faced creature stood three hands in height, and short brown hair covered his head and continued down his back like an arrow. Long cream fur covered his monkey body, and his long hairless rat-tail twitched with excitement. He wore a blue vest and had a burlap sack slung over his shoulder.

His large dark brown eyes scanned the beach and noticed wreckage scattered along the shore. The Trife searched the jungle to see if he was followed, turned his attention back to the beach littered with possible treasure, sniffed the wind for any other danger, and slunk to a piece of wood. The Trife turned the broken plank over and found nothing of value when a glint in the distance from a large mass caught his eye. He ran to it ready to scurry into the jungle at the slightest hint of trouble. The Trife found a large creature faced down in the sand. It was large compared to his standards. Quip, what the others of his kind called him, circled the stranger. She was furry like him but beige and cat-like. He had seen creatures similar to her on his journeys to the Great City Shangra. Quip stroked her fiery-crimson mane. "Soft," he muttered and proceeded to search for the glint he'd seen. "What this?" The stranger gripped a sword, and Quip rubbed his four-clawed hands together as he mumbled to himself, "Weapon... Bring good price." He hurried to the sword and tried to pull it from her grasp, and then he said, "Won't budge..." He noticed the ancient engravings on its blade and knew it was magic and very valuable. Ecstatic with the find, Quip tried prying her gloved fingers from the sword. He had to have it. The stranger stirred and rolled over on her back, knocking Quip on his tail. She woke! He had to hide! Quip scurried for the jungle, forgetting his sack. Pluck blinked in the light of the setting sun, sat up, and coughed. The ocean stretched before her, and the smell of the salty beach filled her nostrils. "Where am..?" she started as she scanned the beach. "No one's here." She stood, grabbed her head, and moaned, "Oh..." Pluck felt a bruise on her forehead. The last thing she remembered was the waterspout. Pluck searched the sea and spotted the tops of five masts sticking out of the water like bony fingers reaching for the sky. It was one of the ships, but which one? She wiped sand from the Lux and sheathed the sword. Pluck started down the beach when she kicked something soft and noticed it was a sack. She picked it up, feeling the small bag wasn't wet and wondered who it belonged to. She noticed tiny footprints that were smaller than a child's around her. Pluck took the sack, followed the tracks to the edge of the jungle, and searched the vegetation, but found no one. Many different scents filled the air. She decided she didn't have time to look and that she had to find Edward, Han, and the others. Pluck turned to leave when a creature pounced on the sack she carried. "Mine!" Quip screeched. "Can't have. Mine!" Startled by something leaping at her, Pluck threw the sack along with the rat-monkey toward the beach, drew her sword, and approached it. Pluck wasn't sure what frightened her more, the creature's strange appearance or that it talked? She pointed her blade at it and demanded, "Who... What are you?" "Don't hurt. Me, Quip," he said as he raised his hairy arms. "Don't mean harm." Pluck didn't feel threatened by the small creature and lowered her sword. She didn't sheathe the Lux on the chance her instincts were wrong as she commented, "I've never seen anything like you." "Quip, Trife. There many Trifes," he told her as he lowered his arms and pointed at her. "Where from?" "I'm from the Fletching Kingdom," Pluck replied as she stared at the strange looking rat-monkey. She wondered if he was cursed like herself, and then she asked, "I need to find the others. Have you seen them?" "Others?" Quip questioned as he didn't understand. "Yes, beings like me," she said as she pointed to herself. Pluck considered that maybe he wasn't cursed. Maybe he was what he was. "Oh... like you. Me seen thousands," he told her as he pointed inland. "Live in Shangra." She ran her hand through her damp sandy mane, remembered her face wasn't hidden and not only that, but the tip of her tail dangled below the cloak. Quip had seen her and said there were others like her. Pluck restated, "The ones I'm looking for are different than I." She pulled her hood on ashamed of her appearance and hid her tail. "They have no fur on their

faces or bodies." "Oh..." Quip said as he stroked his long chin hair. "Me not seen." "I have to find them. Maybe..." she started as she looked over the Trife, trying to read his character. "Can you help me find them?" "Help?" Quip exclaimed and then laughed at the notion. "What me get?" She checked her belt, found her wet money pouch, opened it, and found fifty crunes. A crune was a small silver coin with a turtle engraved on it. She knelt, held up a crune, and told him, "I'll give you this if you help me." "Three..." Quip said as he held up his claws, signifying the number. "Me help sun's cycle." "Two crunes," Pluck countered. "And the sun's cycle will be from sunset to sunset. There are many to find." Quip scratched his chin then told her, "Feed me, it deal." Food? She didn't even have a Jewel Apple, so Pluck answered, "You can eat half of what I have." "Agreed," the Trife said as he spat on his paw and offered it to her. She made a face, then took his paw, and shook it. "Pay," he insisted. She told him, "When the job is over or the sun's cycle, not till then." "Capah!" Quip cursed. "Fine..." "We need a plan of action. You're native..." Pluck interrupted herself as she wondered where she was. What kind of land would have a talking creature? Was there magic there? She sheathed the Lux and asked, "What's the name of this place?" "MayPah of West Region," Quip replied as he stared at the sword sad he wouldn't have the wealth it would have brought him. "West Region? West Region of what?" Quip tilted his head curiously as he questioned, "Not know? Wellspring." "Wellspring? We're not on the Isle of Kismet," she uttered as she looked over the sea which seemed vast now. "Then we are lost." She paused and considered their situation, and then she told herself, "There'll be time to worry about that later. I must find the others." She pointed along the white sandy beach lapped by blue-green water and ordered, "Quip you go south, and I'll go north. If you find someone or when the sun rises, come back to this point." Pluck piled planks from the wreckage in an X the size of a man up beyond the tide line. Quip nodded and scurried along the beach as Pluck hurried north and along the way, she noticed hoof prints. The horses... Some must have survived. Pluck started up the beach, fearful she would find neither man nor animal alive. She had better find the steeds, so she tracked them into the jungle, found three near a small stream, checked them over, and found minor injuries. Pluck grabbed their reins and led them to the beach. It was standard procedure to leave halters and saddles on horses when traveling by ship. The sun set, darkening the area with twilight as more strange animal sounds blared from the jungle and make the horses nervous. She traveled for more than a nal and found no one but another horse. The steed was dead, drowned. The sky ever darkened as her feline eyes quickly adjusted to the night. The others weren't as fortunate to have her sight but... She glanced up and saw both new moons rising in the black sky. Auror the Greater and Array the Lesser would give them light. Pluck hoped they searched the beach and didn't venture into the jungle. She stopped as her keen senses picked up a familiar scent on the breeze. Fire. Someone could be near. She ran along the shore with the horses trotting behind. A roaring flame appeared ahead, and many men stood around it. Pluck stopped abruptly, shocked by what she saw. All the men had removed their outer clothing and were standing in their surads, underwear cut above the knee. They wore their sword frogs over their surads while their wet clothing laid on rocks around the fire. Embarrassed by the sight of their near nakedness, she turned and shaded her eyes. "Halt!" one of them shouted as most of the men went for their swords, and the Archers knocked their arrows. "Identify yourself!" It was too late to leave, so she declared, "I am Pluck, the Northern High Guard." "Pluck?" Han shouted, glanced down at himself, went, and stood behind the others. "Come." She entered the ring of light and there she diverted her eyes from their near nakedness

once again. Curiosity got the better of her, and she glanced around at their faces seeing Han, Edward, Ardor, Fracas, Melee, Captain Brine, a few sailors, and more than five dozen High Guards stared at her. Bulwark was there also holding the glass container with the Mystic Rose whose petals were pink. The commander pulled on his pants and motioned for one of the soldiers to step forward. A High Guard came, took the three horses from her, tied them to a tree near other horses they'd found, and removed their saddles and blankets. "You survived," Han uttered as he hugged her and stepped back. "Have you seen any of the others?" That was most odd, Ardor considered. The commander greeted Pluck like a son. Did the Northern High Guard find favor with Han? Ardor sneered as he feared his right to succeed the commander might be challenged and with Han's support, Pluck might succeed. "No one," she answered Han and turned her gaze to the fire. "Did all the ships sink?" "We know three did," Ardor answered, stepping closer to them as the flickering fire cast a shadow beside the scar under his right eye. "We have found no signs of the Dark Monarch." Pluck glanced at Han's Second and noticed Ardor had a large scar across his chest and a small one on his calf. Pluck turned her gaze, realizing he noticed her stare. Ardor sneered again. Did the Northern High Guard suspect his fears? Did Pluck plot as he did to ensure the commander position? The Northern High Guard hid something. What could it be? Ardor had to know. It could be the one thing that secured his advance. He made a fist and swore to himself he would find out no matter the price. "The Dark Monarch is Princess Virago's ship," Edward said as he paced. "We must find her. If we do not, it shall be meaningless that we made it to Kismet." Pluck turned at hearing the Prince's voice and blushed as she saw him in his surad. His gold medallion reflected the fire's light as she looked at the ground ashamed she saw her prince like this. Pluck spoke, "I don't think we're on Kismet." "What do you mean?" Edward questioned. "I ran into one of the natives," Pluck replied as she stared at the fire, though her curiosity of the male physique tempted her. "He said this place is called Wellspring." "Where's this native now?" Ardor asked. "I had him go south along the beach looking for any survivors. He's to return to a place I marked at sunrise or if he finds anyone," Pluck answered, and then she heard movement and told everyone, "Many approach us." She reached up, drew the Lux, and moved to the front of those gathered as she shouted, "Identify yourselves." "It is I, Vim, second in command of the Sentinels. I have with me twenty-four of my men," he answered as his voice sounded labored like he was carrying something. "Three are injured." Pluck saw that they were Morgog royal army but knew the others couldn't, so she told them, "Come into the light." Vim and his men did. "What ship are you from?" Han asked. "Sea Sprite," Vim answered. "We believe we are all who survived." "Then no one knows if Virago is well," Edward stated as he couldn't stand not knowing for the Emperor's crown depended on both he and the Princess arriving at Kismet. If Virago was dead, this whole trip was for nothing... It was a complete waste of his time. Vim replied, "I don't know." "I cannot wait any longer. I must see if she is alive," Edward said as he grabbed his white cotton pants and blue silk shirt that were still a little wet and put them on. "We shall take torches and go look for her." Han put on his white shirt and red cape, and then he ordered, "Ardor, you, Melee, Pluck, and Fracas come with us." "Yes, commander," the men replied and started dressing. Han turned to the others and commanded them, "The rest of you stay here and wait for those who might find this fire." "I shall go with you," Vim insisted. "Of course," Han said, knowing he would demand the same if he was the Morgog Second. Vim, who was tall as Fracas the Archer, turned to his men and ordered them, "Stay here, tend to the wounded, and dry by the fire." He removed his waterlogged black leather armor and

undershirt and set them on the rocks but left on his wet pants and boots. Vim's long black hair was pulled back in a single braid as was customary for Sentinels. He added, "Group here. I shall go with these men to look for our princess, Lord Caliber, and Avarice our commander." "Yes, sir," they replied as they set down their wounded. After dressing, Ardor went and stood by the Northern High Guard and noticed a sweet musky scent surrounded Pluck. The Northern High Guard smelled like a wet cat. He cleared his throat and said, "Commander, perhaps Pluck should stay and dry himself. We do not want him to catch a cold." She told him, "I'm fine." Pluck looked at Han. Surely he knew she couldn't stay here for she couldn't undress in front of the men. "Pluck shall come," Han commanded. "Then let us leave," Edward insisted. "Can we take a few of the horses?" "I would not, my lord," Han said as he went over and patted one on the neck. "What few survived, need their rest after their ordeal." "Then let us set out on foot," Edward ordered as he grabbed a torch from a supply crate that washed ashore and held it over the fire until it dried enough to catch flame. Ardor, Han, Vim, and Melee also lit torches. The Prince led the group into the night along the shore as he said, "Quickly now, keep with me." They ran, matching his frantic pace as the moons gave plenty of light to the beach. The group heard the sea lap at the sand and felt it rush under their feet and splash their legs. Along the way, they found four dead sailors and two High Guards.

Sometime later...

Ardor couldn't believe they dishonored their dead by abandoning their bodies. They should have done more than dragged their bodies up the beach so the sea didn't reclaim them. He clasped the Black Elk insignia on his red cape. Did this symbol mean nothing to them? Should they not honor their brothers? Han sensed his concerns and told his Second, "We'll be back for them. They'll receive a burial befitting a High Guard." The commander stopped so he could face his Second and told him, "First, we must make sure our future queen is safe." Ardor glanced at his prince who was now a great distance ahead of them and stated, "I understand." "Good, let us make haste and catch up to our lord," Han said, and then he jogged ahead. Ardor followed. The commander had great wisdom. If only he could lead with such when it was his turn. He glanced at Pluck, knowing there was something not right with the Northern High Guard. What was his secret? Within a nal, they arrived at Pluck's marker and found several men. A few were crouched as they tried to start a fire with their flint from their High Guard belt. Two men approached the Prince and his group. Edward and Han lifted their torches and saw Sinew and Parry standing there shivering before them. "My lord... Commander... Are... are both of you well?" Parry stuttered. Melee walked over with his torch and ignited the lightwood, and slowly the men added more wood until a fire roared. "Yes, we are searching for Princess Virago. Have you seen her?" Edward asked. "No, my lord," Sinew replied. "We have seen no one else except the odd little creature who told us to meet here. He said Pluck instructed him to do so." "I did," she said as she stepped forward. "Where's Quip now?" "Me here," the Trife replied as he scurried in from the darkness and warmed his paws by the fire. "By Fletching!" Ardor uttered. "What the Phraggs?" Vim drew his sword and spat, "The Fires of Morgog! We should kill this vile thing." "No!" Pluck yelled as she stepped between them. "He's helping us. He's a friend." "Me friend," Quip insisted as he hid behind her cloak like a frightened child. "There can be only sorcery involved," Vim exclaimed, and then he insisted, "It must be destroyed!" "Stow your weapon, Morgog," Han demanded. "If Pluck says the creature is a friend, then it is." "Crell!" Vim cursed as

he sneered and sheathed his sword. "Morgogs are not quick to make such judgments of loyalty. A word is nothing only action. I shall keep my eye on this creature." Quip gulped and muttered, "Me afraid." "I would stay out of Vim's way if I were you," Pluck spoke as she knelt to the Trife. "Were you able to find anyone else?" "Ship," Quip answered as he pointed into the darkness. "Where?" Edward demanded. "Cove," Quip replied. "Far." "Take us there," Edward commanded. "Yes," Vim agreed. "We must go now." "Me take," Quip said as he headed into the darkness. "Follow." The group started off as Han turned to Sinew and Parry and commanded them, "Stay here. Warm yourselves. We shall return." The group followed the Trife along the shore. Several nals went by before they reached the cove and there they saw a ship anchored. The first rays of the new sun's cycle peered over the jungle and revealed a rocky shore around the cove, and the jungle lay beyond the rocks. The water in the cove was indigo unlike the blue-green water surrounding the island. The hilt of the Lux flashed twice. "What is this?" Vim demanded as he looked at the sword strapped to the Northern High Guard's back. "Does he carry a weapon of magic?" "There's nothing to fear, Sentinel," Han insisted. "Are you suspicious of everything?" "I am Morgog," he answered, tightening his jaw. "Have all of you gone mad? Crell! Only evil can come from dealing with such things." For once, Ardor agreed with a Morgog. No favorable end would come from Pluck's weapon. Han looked at the approaching rays as he said, "We can move faster in the light. Let's hurry." Pluck frowned as she considered too many feared magic. What would happen when they discovered she was cursed by it? "Let us move to the other side of the cove," Edward ordered as he started walking over the large rocks surrounding the area. "The shore this way is closest to the ship." Quip scurried after the Prince. The Trife darted forward, stopped, scanned the area, and sniffed the wind. He did this several times and within a quarter of a nal, they were nearly to the point closest to the Dark Monarch. Pluck scanned the indigo waters surrounding the ship and saw tiny sparkles shimmering in the light of the sun and dancing in its yellow radiance. She smiled, delighted by the beautiful sight, but her delight turned to bewilderment. Movement in the water splashed away the reflections, and she noticed many shadows swimming beneath the indigo surface. Hundreds of these dark shapes neared the Princess' ship. "There's something in the water!" Pluck warned and hurried ahead. Quip looked at the cove and exclaimed, "Not good. Ship disturbed Breed." He darted into the jungle as he yelled, "Hide!" "What are they talking about?" Ardor asked as he squinted but couldn't see anything at their distance. "Quickly!" Han ordered. "If Pluck says there's something, then there is." How could Pluck see from this distance? Ardor thought only animals had that ability. The group rushed for the Dark Monarch and in the distance, they heard men cry out in alarm. Shouts of battle replaced the panic as the Sentinels and sailors engaged an enemy. Many Morgog Bowmen lined the sides of the ship, firing at objects in the air and in the sea while those with swords and knives struck at things on deck. "Who do they fire upon?" Vim questioned as he squinted. "I see nothing." "I don't know," Han replied as he drew his sword. "But we shall give them a hand." "They're fighting creatures that fly out of the water," Pluck answered. "Maybe Quip is right. Maybe the Dark Monarch disturbed these creatures' brood." Hundreds of Breed darted out of the dark blue murk like arrows. Their heavily armored bodies were scaled and colored like beryl, and their long eel forms whipped through the air as they spread their spiked fins. The armor-fish sliced by the sailors and Sentinels. Men cried out, cut by the knife like spikes and after their attacks, the Breed glided over the top of the ship, darted down for a second wave, and returned to the water. The Morgog Bowmen fired, striking many of the water fiends,

but their arrows couldn't penetrate the creatures' scaled armor. The Breed's relentless attacks continued like an angry swarm of Swamp Wasp. Princess Virago stayed safely below, listening to her people battle the horrendous creatures. "Why do these fiends attack us?" she questioned Lord Caliber. "I want them to stop. Make them stop!" "I do not know, my lady," he answered, gripping the seal of the small window he peered out of. "Perhaps a wielder of magic raised this unholy army to prevent us from completing the Amalgamation." "How can we fight such sorcery?" Virago asked as she clinched Lady Flaxen's dress as the two of them huddled in a corner away from the window. "I do not know," Lord Caliber replied as he paced her cabin. "Can we not leave this cove?" Flaxen asked. "I heard the Dark Monarch's captain tell Avarice the ship takes on water. The continuous bailing is all that keeps her afloat," Lord Caliber answered as he glanced out the window as a Breed slammed into the wall, sending the advisor scrambling for safety. The translucent aqua armor-fish looked through the window with its large white oval eye. Lord Caliber ran over to the glass and muttered a few words at the creature, and it flew off. "Something must be done about these fiends." "Where is the commander of my Sentinels?" Virago questioned now safely behind Flaxen still huddling in the corner. "Avarice is where he should be, my lady," Lord Caliber replied as he crept back to the door, listening to the commotion above. "He is on deck commanding his men. Only he can save us."

Chapter Eleven

The Breed

On the Dark Monarch's deck...

"Bowmen!" Avarice shouted as he raised his two-handed Flamberge sword and shouted over the turmoil. His long gray-black hair was tied back in a braid and his sideburns came to a point at his jaw. "Use flaming arrows. Surely the Fires of Morgog shall vanquish these beasts!" Sentinel Footsoldiers retrieved small barrels of oil from the hold. Monks collected the fuel from the pools feeding the Capital's most sacred place. The Footsoldiers set them beside the Bowmen, opened the containers, and then torches were lit and handed out. The Bowmen dipped their special arrows in the oil, lit them, and fired upon the Breed. The armor-fish squealed in agony when hit by the flames as oil and fire spread over their scaled bodies. A few dived into the cove, and steam hissed as they hit, but many of the Breed burst into ash and the wind scattered their remains. "Nock arrows," Avarice ordered as his pale blue eyes searched the water. "Fire!" The second wave caused the Breed to retreat to their liquid home. Over fifty of them had been destroyed. Vim, Han, and the others arrived on the beach opposite the Dark Monarch. "The beasts have retreated," Vim said as he searched the indigo waters. "At least for now." "Perhaps it would be better if the Dark Monarch anchored elsewhere," Han stated as he looked at the Prince. "Agreed," Edward said as he scanned the ship, but he didn't see the Princess. "I shall speak with Virago."

Aboard the Dark Monarch...

"Is it over?" Lord Caliber questioned as he crept on deck. "Are the creatures gone?" "Yes, my lord," Avarice replied as he looked over his scratched and battered men. "For the most part, the beasts were no more than a painful nuisance. We lost no one. The cuts shall heal with time." "Cuts?" Lord Caliber questioned as he glanced around the ship. "Ah yes, the men... so then we are safe?" Virago stepped on deck with Lady Flaxen. "My Princess, you shouldn't be on deck. The fiends could attack again," Avarice spoke as his war hardened face wrinkled with concern. "If something should happen to you, our hope for the Amalgamation—" "Thank you for your concern, commander, but the ship is filling with water, and I wish to depart. Have your men follow us to shore. The captain and sailors can deal with the Dark Monarch. There are many supplies and my presents that need to be unloaded." "At once," Avarice said and started preparations. Sailors lowered several longboats to the water and rowed them to shore and after many trips, Dark Monarch's Sentinels were on the beach along with half the ship's sailors. "Princess..." Avarice spoke as he bowed with Vim and four Footsoldiers. "All my men aboard the Dark Monarch are accounted for. The captain and a few sailors remain on the ship to salvage what they can before she sinks." He motioned to Vim and then said, "My Second informs me that the Sea Sprite sank. He does not know how many survived save the men he left with the High Guards." Edward approached with Han, Ardor, and Melee, and the Prince told them, "We lost both of our ships to the spouts." Avarice glared at the High Guards and exclaimed, "Arrogant mongrels! Bow before your Princess when you enter her presence." Han looked at the Prince, and Edward nodded. The three High Guards bowed to her. "My apologies Princess, my men are not used to having such a beautiful woman in their presence," Han said. Virago smiled. "What do we do now?" Lord Caliber asked as he walked to the group, stomping his staff across the sand. "We should set up camp," Han suggested. Avarice sneered and hid his dislike for the Fletching Commander as he said, "I concur." He looked around the cove and the jungle, and then he added, "We should find a place that is defensible." Pluck approached and stated, "Han we found a cave, but it isn't very large." "A cave," Virago said as she made a face. "I do not think I would want to stay in a dark dank place." Pluck continued, "We also came across a large clearing with two hills. I recommend this spot." "It sounds like an ideal place to defend," Avarice commented. "Then let us set up camp before night is upon us," the Prince ordered. Morgog and Fletching worked together to set up camp. Most of the supplies used were salvaged from the Dark Monarch, but a few crates and items from the other ships were found along the shore. Virago and Lord Caliber's rectangular tents were set up one on each hilltop. The Princess made Lord Caliber give his tent to Edward so the lord bunked with Avarice. The large rectangular tents had three sections. The first had a parlor with chairs, couches, and tables, the second housed clothing chests and was used for changing, and the third held the bed. A flap divided each section. Avarice set up his round tent at the bottom of the hill on the east side as Sentinels and Morgog sailors made camp around him. Han, borrowing a Morgog round tent, set up his tent on the west side as High Guards and Fletching sailors set up around him. Many shared housing to compensate for the supplies lost at sea. Out of the 200 High Guards and 38 Fletching sailors, 32 High Guards and 11 sailors were missing or found dead. The Morgogs fared better. Out of 200 Sentinels and 40 sailors, 21 Sentinels and 9 sailors were missing or found dead. Most of the horses were found alive, and only three had to be put down for their injuries. The group had little food and most of their water was contaminated by the sea except that on the Dark Monarch. Night came and torches were lit as sentries walked the perimeter of the hills. A new sun's cycle came as Avarice,

Vim, and Lord Caliber made their way to the Prince's tent. Outside, Melee and Bulwark stood guard. The three Morgogs entered and found Han, Ardor, and Edward looking over a map. "The map does us no good," Ardor said. "It does not tell us where we are or how to reach Kismet. We have wasted enough time." "I agree," Avarice spoke up. "We sailed Coblet's Route to catch up on the other Kingdoms. We have only lost time." Lord Caliber walked to the table the map laid on and spoke, "That is apparent to all of us, commander, but how do we leave Wellspring? The Dark Monarch is not seaworthy nor do we have the supplies to repair her." "Perhaps we should find a city or a port and get what supplies we need or even buy a ship," Han suggested as he glanced around. "Has anyone seen the Trife? He could assist us." "The Trife?" Avarice questioned. Vim leaned to his commander and told him, "It's a creature that assisted us in finding you. It is a talking beast." "Is it a Necrom?" Lord Caliber asked. "No," Vim replied as he shook his head, and the black braid lying over his right shoulder moved. He leveled his hand near his leg as he explained, "It is smaller like a dog but walks upright." "Pluck and Quip went to the beach to search for survivors," Ardor answered. "They said they would return this morning." Han's brow wrinkled with thought, and then he said, "Perhaps we should busy our men with finding water and food and then when the Trife returns, we can have him make a map of this area. He may even know of a city." "Can we trust this creature?" Avarice asked. "Necrom or not, a beast that talks can only mean magic." Han answered, "Vim told me a word is nothing to Morgogs only actions. The Trife has proven he can help and has done nothing to revoke my trust." "Your trust, perhaps," Avarice stated. "Fine, but I am leery of any beast that talks." "As the Necroms proved to our forefathers," Lord Caliber added. "Talking beasts cannot be trusted." Avarice looked at Vim and the lord, and then he told them, "Come, there is much to do." Ardor went to the entrance and waited for the Morgogs to enter their camp, and then he said, "Commander..." He turned and walked to Han, and then he spoke, "I've never heard you talk so... so..." "Without command," Edward said. Han nodded as he stated, "There is a lesson here, my Second. Our alliance is a delicate one so there shall be many power struggles. It is best to walk lightly." "You believe Avarice might challenge Edward or you?" He answered, "The Morgog Commander would never challenge Edward, but me..." Han paused and then said, "Avarice might be thinking ahead. How many commanders can there be? What shall become of our armies? It is best for now not to let him think I'm threatening him."

Chapter Twelve

Dreadgons

Pluck and Quip returned, having found several more men. Soldiers, Fletching and Morgog alike, set about their daily chores. Some stoked the fires while others gathered wood. Large cast iron pots were placed over flames to boil water for Sable Coffee, a very black liquid served straight, and Chip Tea. It was made from a brownish-red bitter root sweetened with Forest Bee's honey. Supplies were divided as Fletching Archers and Morgog Bowmen checked their equipment, made new arrows, and repaired old. Many High Guards and Sentinel Calvary sat, sharpening their swords. Trackers set out and scouted the area and led parties to hunt game. Sailors searched for

springs and gathered fruits and nuts while the Princess and Lady Flaxen slept through the morning. Before midday, the Fletching circle and Quip met with the Morgog command. "I say we send a party to this Great City the Trif—" "Me, Trife," Quip interrupted Vim. The Morgog Second growled, and the rat-monkey said no more, returning to his drawing. "As I was saying, we should send a party to this Great City the Trife speaks of," Vim said as he leaned on the table and looked at the map Quip drew of MayPah. He didn't like dealing with the small creature. It reminded him too much of what Necroms supposedly looked like. "Surely, they shall have ships we can hire to sail us to Kismet." "We are too few. We shouldn't send a group," Ardor insisted. "Let us move as a whole and send scouts ahead of us and that should save time." "There... Me done," Quip stated as he stood on the sketch and examined his creation. "Good map." He pointed with the quill which was nearly half his size and told them, "Shangra beyond Echo Marsh. Take riding animals three sun's cycles, but travel through Land of Mud People. Me travel long way around. Mud People no like visitors." "What other options are there than going to this city?" Edward questioned as he scanned the map. The gold medallion of a charging Black Elk dangled from his neck. Lord Caliber scanned the Prince's hands, looking for markings, and then he turned to the Morgog Commander and shook his head. Avarice frowned and turned his attention to Edward's question and stated, "Other options?" The Morgog Commander and Han glanced at each other and shrugged. "None that we can come up with, my lord," Han spoke as he studied the Callow Jungle. "Quip, what dangers might we face while trekking this land besides these Mud People you spoke of?" "Dangers?" he questioned as he scratched his rat-nose. "Yes, are there other creatures like the Breed that we might face? Even though we are running out of time, I would prefer a safe route." "Many..." the Trife replied as he shuttered. "Me avoid. Me not like conflict." "Avoidance is best," Han said. "Can you draw us the best course to the Great City Shangra?" Quip nodded and went to work. Sinew rushed in as sweat ran down the tracker's bald head, and then he uttered as his pale face shone of terror, "Commander, quickly outside." Everyone hurried out. "What is it?" Ardor demanded. "There!" Sinew shouted as he pointed. The camp was up in arms, looking down at the jungle where the tracker motioned. In the distance, trees swayed and cracked and then toppled to the ground as a tidal wave of leaves and branches headed for the camp. The ground trembled as a great weight stomped across the land, and the wave of trees continued their way. Han turned to Sinew and uttered, "By Fletching! What manner of creature is approaching us?" The tracker told him, "I don't know. A man from my hunting party came, screaming to us about monsters. When the ground shook, I told the men to run." He pleaded with his hands as he said, "Please forgive me, I wasn't thinking. I led the creatures here." "Creatures?" Han spoke as he turned to Avarice. "Let us ready the Archers and Bowmen so they may attack whatever emerges from the jungle if these things are hostile." He faced his men and ordered them, "Melee and Pluck take Edward, go retrieve the Princess, and take them to a more protective area." He looked down for the Trife and spoke, "Quip." "Me know place," he said as he turned to Pluck. "Hurry, me don't like what comes." Quip muttered, "Very big. Very bad." "I shall join you," Lord Caliber spoke as he followed Edward. Pluck stared at the unknown menace as part of her wished to stay and face this enemy. Reluctantly, she obeyed Han and followed Edward and Melee, but she paused once more as the ground shook. She was apprehensive and felt like she needed to stay. Something was going to happen that would shape the future. Dread gripped her heart as she feared it wouldn't be for the good. Pluck watched as Archers and Bowmen readied themselves, and she felt their terror and those in the

camp. Whatever came, even the trees couldn't stop them. Pluck obeyed Han through her mounting fears and followed the Prince. Han and his men mounted their horses and unsheathed their silver handled rapiers. The Sentinel Cavalry mounted their horses and drew their Flamberges as their Footsoldiers readied their spears. The last tree fell just short of the clearing and shot leaves up in a whirlwind. The undergrowth settled and there was silence. No one dared move as a few restless horses neighed and stomped the dirt. A deep voice roared from the jungle, "Violators!" The trees shook from the voice's bellow, and the voice like a Mountain Bear shouted, "We are Dreadgons, and we are infuriated. You violated our swamp and stole our food." The ground shook as the Dreadgon yelled, "We demand retribution!" "Swamp?" Han looked at the Morgog Commander and asked him, "Did any of your men report coming upon a swamp?" "Yes," Avarice replied as he kept his gaze to the jungle. "Some of my men found several birds nesting in the area and took their eggs." He steadied his anxious horse. Han said, "We should give them back." "It is too late." For the first time, Avarice looked at the Fletching Commander like he was something he'd wiped from his boot, and then he said, "My men already boiled and ate them." Ardor murmured to the commander, "Eggs? They didn't mention this before." He spoke, "They were hoarding them. Now we are about to pay for food we had no taste off." "Quiet," Han ordered as he stifled his own rage. "Now is not the time." He yelled, "We didn't know the eggs were yours. We are strangers here and had no knowledge anyone claimed the swamp. We wouldn't have taken them if we had known." Han looked over their combined forces and knew they couldn't afford a battle, so he asked, "What can we give you to compensate for what we took?" Quip returned, climbed a nearby tree for a better view, tilted his head, and listened to the Dreadgons discuss the matter. Only his sensitive rat-ears could hear the conversation. "Gar, these violators stole what would have fed us this sun's cycle and the next two. What do they possess that could compensate?" "I don't know, Tusk. They possess work animals, but we don't eat flesh, and they are too small for us to ride." Gar reasoned, "If they stole the eggs, they probably don't have enough food to replace what they ate." The Dreadgon paused, and then he spoke, "They did say they are strangers here, and I don't recognize their kind. I see one option that will settle this—" "I agree," Tusk interrupted before Gar finished. The other Dreadgons murmured their agreement. Gar cleared his throat and shouted, "You are wise, outlander, but you possess nothing we want. Only blood will satisfy our dispute." Han glared at the Morgog Commander as he yelled, "They are going to kill us for the eggs your men stole!" Avarice snarled and nudged his steed forward, and then he spoke, "We shall see about that." Vim and the Morgog Cavalry followed. Quip climbed down the tree and jumped on Han's horse. He tugged on the High Guard's red cape and then told him, "Dreadgons no fight. Ask Blood Pledge, promise you'll remain off land. Customary among jungle dwellers." "An oath?" Han repeated, and then he shouted, "Commander wait!" He kicked his horse and rode toward the other commander as he yelled, "Hold your men." "Fass! You Fletching are mongrels!" Avarice yelled as he whirled his steed around to face the Fletching Commander. "How can you cower at a time like this?" he asked as he made a fist. "One sun's cycle you Fletching shall taste..." He stopped himself from finishing his sentence. "Commander," Vim spoke up. "Perhaps we should hear what—" "Nonsense," Avarice scolded his Second. "These things call for blood." He reined his horse to face the jungle as he shouted, "Blood they shall have!" Avarice pointed his sword at the jungle and yelled, "BOWMEN! FIRE!" "No!" Han shouted. "They don't want a fight!" The Morgog Bowmen released their steel pointed fury into the vegetation. The Dreadgons roared, and five of them rushed out,

removing arrows like they were nothing more than thorns. The large beasts, who were the size of huts, swung huge spiked clubs above their heads and charged up the slope. They were stout and wide as they were tall. Thick gray skin covered them, and dense black hair blanketed their huge forearms, bare feet, and hunched backs. Their large ridged heads were a third of their size, and they had no necks. Three sallow eyes set in a triangle and glared at the men as two yellow tusks curved out from their large square lips. Their noses were pig-like, and brown pants, that were held up by a wide buckled belt, covered their stout legs. The Bowmen scattered as the lead Dreadgon slammed his spiked club on the ground, and dirt burst into the air. The Dreadgon leveled his weapon and pointed it across the camp as he declared, "Small foolish ones, now blood won't settle this dispute only your deaths." He lifted his spiked weapon and stated, "I, Gar, proclaim this." He swung his club and clipped three Bowmen in his path, and the men screamed as they were hurled across the camp. Another Dreadgon grabbed two Fletchings by their capes, whipped them in the air, and slammed them on the ground. The gray beast did this several times and left the men to choke on their own blood. Avarice quickly called his Cavalry to retreat as a Dreadgon swung his club and missed a few Archers but smashed a supply tent. His attack took out several crates and barrels spilling their contents to the dirt. "I, Tusk, will smash you," a Dreadgon shouted whose tusks were much larger than the others. He stomped after the Morgog Cavalry, grunting angrily. Han shouted to his men, "Distract the beasts so our Archers may flee." He scanned the camp and spotted Gar as he added, "But do not attack." Han shouted to his Archers, "Cease fire!" He headed his horse for the leader as he yelled, "Gar!" Han galloped to the Dreadgon and told him, "I am their leader. This matter should be between you and me." A few of the Fletching Archers, who hadn't heard the orders, fired on the Dreadgons. Most of their arrows bounced off their armor-like hides, and the few that penetrated barely nicked them. The mounted High Guards ran their horses around the great beasts, allowing their Archers to flee. Gar grabbed a Fletching sailor and raised his club to smash the head of the helpless man. He caught the sailor's scent and paused, sniffing over him with his slimy hog nose. He glanced around the camp and sniffed the wind as a righteous anger overcame him. Gar dropped the sailor, and the terrified man scurried away. Han neared Gar when another Dreadgon stomped in front of the commander and spooked his horse. His steed reared as Han tried to steady it, but the horse lost its balance. The steed fell back on top of Han. "Stop!" Gar ordered, and the Dreadgons did. "Why stop?" Tusk asked. "We blamed all these creatures because they look alike. Bigotry..." Gar spoke as he tucked his club into his wide belt, and then he said, "It is now clear to me there are two different groups." He hurried to the fallen commander as he spoke, "This one claims responsibility and yet he doesn't have the scent of our eggs on him only the ones in black do and yet they are the ones fleeing." He grabbed the horse with both his large hands, lifted it off the commander, and gently put it down, and the steed walked away only winded. "This matter demands justice but not at the cost of the innocent." "Then it's a matter of fairness," Tusk spoke, and then he nodded his approval and snorted for the others to join them. They watched Gar try to help the commander who had fallen. Blood ran from Han's mouth as Ardor dismounted and rushed to his side. "Stay back," he warned the Dreadgon. "Commander..." Ardor dared not move him for blood stained his side. "Your ribs..." "I know. There's nothing you can do," Han told him as he gritted his teeth for the pain. "We must settle this." He reached out his arm and told Ardor, "Help me sit up." "I think it best if you—" He interrupted Ardor, "I think it best you do as I command." Han squeezed his Second's hand as he sat up. "Gar..." He coughed up blood, and

then he spoke, "We must satisfy this." "I now understand your people were not at fault here," Gar said as he glanced around the battered camp and noticed Avarice. "Are both of you the true leaders?" Han winced, and then he replied, "No, but we are the protectors." He struggled to breathe. "Send for your leaders," Gar demanded. Han looked at Parry and ordered him, "Have Quip show you where the Prince and the Princess are. Tell Edward they have been summoned." The Blond Ox choked back tears, seeing his commander near death and said, "At once." He and Quip shortly returned with the Prince and the Princess. Edward stepped forward and declared, "I am Prince Edward." Those with Gar were awed by the Princess and Lady Flaxen. "Look, fair ones," one of the Dreadgons uttered as he pointed his club. "They would satisfy us." "Them?" Gar repeated as he looked the females over, and then he questioned the other Dreadgon, "What do you want them for? They are too small to be our mates." "They could cook and clean for us," another Dreadgon answered. "That would make up for the eggs we lost, and they are pretty." "No," Edward declared, putting himself between the women and the gray beasts. "You shall not have them." "Yes, they would satisfy the debt," Tusk agreed. Gar looked at Han and then to Edward and told them, "The Dreadgons have spoken. They are what we want, but we can be fair since they're your only females." He glanced at Pluck and added, "At least, ones like yourself." He looked over Virago and Flaxen and said, "We'll take her." He pointed to the Princess as he spoke, "And we'll put it to a match. One of you verses me. If I, Gar, win, we take her. You win we leave in peace." "What?" Virago screamed. "NO... No! No! You cannot do that." She looked at Lord Caliber and Avarice for protection. "That is an outrage," Lord Caliber declared. Gar glared at the tall man with the long inky-black goatee and told him, "That or we take her now." He looked at the sky and said, "I, Gar, give you one nal to find your champion and tend to your wounded and then the match will begin." He motioned to the Dreadgons, they headed into the jungle, and the ground shook as they left. "Quickly," Ardor shouted to Sinew and Fracas. "Help me with the commander."

Chapter Thirteen

The Beast Revealed

Sinew, Fracas, and Parry helped carry Han to his tent and laid him on his cot. Edward, Melee, and Pluck followed behind. Many High Guards gathered to see their fallen commander. Virago stomped in with Flaxen in pursuit. "Now may not be the best time, my lady," Flaxen warned. Virago ignored her and questioned, "How can you allow them to take me?" She grabbed the Prince's arm and told him, "You cannot permit this." Edward looked into her blue eyes, seeing her fear. At first, she had been an object, a possession for him to obtain to gain the Emperor's crown but now that she was his, Edward felt a sense of responsibility and a sense that he must protect her. Could this be love? "I shall not let them," Edward told her as he squeezed her hand. "I would die first." Virago saw compassion in the Prince's face and this surprised her so she quieted her tantrum. "I believe you," she said as she smiled and remembered what awaited her. "But how can we stop the Dreadgons? They are so strong." "Please..." Ardor snapped as he couldn't handle her whining while Han lay near death. He motioned for the High Guards to leave

as he said, "There are too many in here." All but Melee and Pluck left as Ardor looked at the Princess but said nothing. "Maybe it best if we also..." Virago started as she glanced at the Fletching Commander. "He needs to be near those he loves." She and Flaxen left. Pluck couldn't hold back, knelt by the commander's side, and started, "Han..." He looked into her face shadowed by the hood. A candle on a stand near his head gave enough light that he saw a tear stream down her furry face. Han told her, "Quiet child, I shall be fine." She looked over his battered body and spoke, "I'm afraid—" Ardor never heard the commander speak with such affection. What was the Northern High Guard doing? This wasn't how a soldier acted. Han interrupted Pluck and told her, "There is nothing to fear, child." He touched her wet cheek with the back of his hand, feeling her soft face. Before his eyes, she had grown into this amazing woman. She was like his daughter, and he feared for her. Han rested his arms at his sides, looked up at the tent, and closed his eyes, knowing his end was near. He couldn't leave things as they were, so he told her, "I believe it is time." Avarice, Vim, and Lord Caliber entered, disrupting Han's explanation. Lord Caliber questioned, "Who among us can face these monsters and triumph?" He stopped in the middle of the tent as the Morgog Commander and Vim joined him. "We must save the Princess. All shall be lost if she is taken." Ardor turned to them and his face was red with rage as he asked, "What about you Avarice? It was your men who stole the eggs, and it is your princess who is in peril." Vim tensed, stepping forward to verbally come to his commander's defense, but Avarice stopped him by grabbing his shoulder. The Morgog Commander laughed at the Fletching's notion. Avarice's cowardice shocked Vim. Vim knew the Fletching spoke the truth. A Morgog should be the champion. Outraged by his laughter, Ardor leapt for the Morgog Commander, but Melee held him back. Ardor yelled, "Fass! Let go of me!" He calmed down and ordered, "I am fine. Release me." Ardor straightened his red cape and his rapier's frog, and then he proclaimed, "I shall face Gar." "No," Han said as he moved and cringed as he forced himself to speak, "Pluck shall be our champion." "Commander?" Ardor spat, stunned by Han's decision. "But I—" "Why me?" Pluck asked also surprised. "It is time, time you showed the others," Han told her as he squeezed her glove. "You are the only one among us with the strength, speed, and—" He motioned to the Lux strapped on her back and added, "—weapon to defeat the Dreadgons." "We all saw what the brutes are capable of," Melee told her as he stepped forward. "If Pluck is to face the Dreadgons, he must rid himself of all loose clothing." Her eyes widened at the thought. Han squeezed her glove again and told her, "It is time. No more hiding." Hiding? Ardor stared at Pluck. He had been right, but what did the Northern High Guard hide? Avarice laughed, and then he said, "If he's our champion, we best prepare to flee with the Princess when your High Guard is defeated." Melee glared at the Morgog Commander and told him, "If Han says Pluck can defeat Gar, then he can." He snarled as he questioned, "Now who is the coward? Ready to flee?" Avarice didn't respond only scowled. Why didn't the commander take up the sword against the Dreadgon? Vim was willing... but he knew that so there had to be something the commander wasn't telling him. Han looked at the Morgog Commander and told him, "Avarice, if you and Lord Caliber could give us some privacy, we need to prepare for the match." Avarice nodded and added with a smirk, "I need to prepare for our escape." He, Vim, and Lord Caliber walked out. Lord Caliber leaned to the Morgog Commander and whispered, "A pity their most experienced soldier has fallen. I do not think he shall survive the night." "Yes," Avarice replied as he added, "A pity." He waited until they were outside, excused Vim to see to their men and once his Second was out of earshot, he asked, "What of our plans? If Edward isn't the one, then who?"

And what of the Dreadgons?" "The Dreadgons may be a surprise, but they shall fit in very nicely." "What do you mean?" Avarice asked. "I believe these large beasts shall uncover the one we seek," Lord Caliber stated. "The one I have been telling you about since we left the Morgog Kingdom." "I remember... someone with the scent of magic." "Yes, and just you wait..." Lord Caliber stroked his thin goatee as he said, "It shall soon be revealed." Inside the tent... "Pluck," Edward started and she turned, rising to face him. The Prince witnessed her skills when they fought Matt and his thugs. She was savage yet talented. He doubted anyone else could stand up to the Dreadgons. He had to make her understand that without Virago there would be no Amalgamation. He examined his heart and believed he had grown to... Edward stumbled over his thoughts since love wasn't a verb used in his family. He liked the Princess, and she must be saved. He put his hands on Pluck's shoulders. She tensed as he touched her. Very few people had touched her since her birth, though, Pluck yearned for affection. She relaxed under his firm grip. He caught a glimpse of her emerald feline eyes, and then he spoke to her, "I know you are afraid, but I need you to fight." "I understand, but do you know what you are asking?" Pluck inquired as she pulled her hood closer to her face. "Yes, I understand. I—" "No," she interrupted. "I don't think you do. If I am to fight, I must remove my cloak." She whispered, "Everyone will know what I am. You know their reactions. Are you prepared to stand up for me?" Edward thought about it. She was right. The Fletching people would be outraged and the Morgog's... He straightened and told her, "I am prepared to stand up for you if you save my wife." Wife... The word cut at her heart. How could Pluck fight to save the Princess when she feared Virago would receive the Kiss? Pluck inhaled and exhaled slowly, and then she said, "I'll do this if you will honor what you promised me in the Mystic Rose's temple. Do you remember your pledge?" Edward's brow wrinkled with wonder. "The Kiss," Pluck told him as she scrutinized his face, looking for the slightest hint of deception. She would fall apart if he lied to her. She told him, "That day you promised me the Kiss." Han couldn't believe it. She'd never told him what it was that would end her curse and all along it was the Kiss. Would Edward give it to her? Had he already given it away? It wasn't a light request. No wonder Pluck never told him. "The Kiss?" Edward uttered as his mouth gaped. "The Kiss!" He couldn't see her face within the shadow of her hood, but he remembered the horror of it. Edward shuddered at the thought of touching his lips to hers as he said, "But I—" Was the Northern High Guard mad? Ardor couldn't understand what was going on. Pluck couldn't... "Would you deny me this?" she questioned as the Prince's disgust and refusal outraged her. "It's the only thing that will end my curse." She shouted, "For all I have done for you..." Pluck calmed herself, and then she told Edward, "This is all I ask. Is it too high a price to save your wife or is it something you have already given away?"

Outside...

"My Lady," Flaxen whispered as she and Virago stood behind Han's tent, listening to the conversation within. "We should leave before we are caught." "Nonsense. I am the Princess. Even if we are caught, what are they going to do?" Virago questioned as they hid among stacked crates, and then she ordered in a whisper, "Quiet, Edward is talking. He is urging one of his men to fight for me." Virago said with disappointment, "Now I cannot hear them." Flaxen leaned in to hear better and told her, "The Northern High Guard is requesting a reward for his bravery." "What reward?" Virago asked. Flaxen strained to hear, and then she replied, "A kriss." "A kriss," the Princess repeated, and then she questioned as the unusual word rolled off

her lips again, "What is a kriss?" "No, that is not it. The Prince is repeating it," Flaxen said, and then she covered her mouth and spoke, "Surely not." "What is it?" Virago asked as she squeezed Flaxen's hand. "What is it?" She turned to the Princess and told her, "I believe the High Guard has requested a kiss." "A kiss?" Puzzled that a man would request such a thing from another man, Virago made a face and then questioned, "Edward has denied him, yes?" Flaxen leaned closer to the tent and then replied, "Not yet. They are still discussing this."

Inside the tent...

"No," Edward told Pluck as he straightened. "I would do anything to save my wife, so I shall bestow upon you the Kiss and to answer your other question, no, I have never given it away." She was relieved there was still a chance, but Pluck feared he would betray her, so she told him, "Swear it as Prince of Fletching and soon to be Emperor of the Five Kingdoms." Edward paused, and then he said, "I swear. Now please, be our champion." Pluck couldn't bring herself to trust him, so she asked him, "Will you protect me when the others find out what I am?" "Yes, yes," he insisted. "Now please be our champion?"

Outside...

"I am afraid, my lady, that the Prince has sworn to give the Northern High Guard the Kiss if he wins," Flaxen stated, and then she bit her lip, knowing the Princess wouldn't respond kindly. "That is not right," Virago exclaimed in a quiet tone. "I thought I had married..." She rubbed her temples as she said, "Wait until my father hears about this." "Come, my lady," Flaxen told her as she peeked over the crates. "Several High Guards are moving this way." Virago sighed and then stated, "My kingdom for a straight man."

Inside the tent...

Pluck hesitated to trust Edward. Han squeezed her hand, and she looked down at him. Han strained to talk as he asked her, "Who raised you and trained you like you were my son?" "You did Han," Pluck answered as she knelt beside him. Jealousy rose in Ardor. He was Han's Second, so he should be the one at his side. Han continued, "Then do this for me." He looked into her face and said, "Swear to me you shall be our champion." He squeezed her arm as Pluck wavered out of fear, and he told her, "Swear it, child." "I swear it, Han. I swear," she said as tears streamed down her face. Pluck was unable to bear seeing him in pain and without a healer, there was nothing anyone could do, not even to ease his suffering. She pleaded, "Don't leave me." "I'm sorry, but I cannot promise," Han told her and then heaved a great sigh. "Already my body is growing cold." "No!" Pluck screamed as she couldn't hold back her emotions, and then she cried, "No, don't die. Don't leave me alone." She gently laid her head on his shoulder as she told him, "You are all I have left." "Stand up, soldier!" Ardor commanded as he couldn't watch this ridiculous scene play out any longer. "This is no way for you to act." Ardor forcefully grabbed Pluck, and she turned as her eyes flashed green with anger in the darkness of her hood. Filled with rage, Pluck hissed at him like a cat. Frightened by what he saw and heard, Ardor stepped back as he uttered, "Crell! What are you?" "Pluck... Ardor..." Han yelled as he chastised them, then he shivered and continued, "This is no way for either of you to behave. Now Pluck, it is time. Let me once more see you as you are." He smiled as he told her, "For soon, you shall be whole

again." She stood and glanced at Ardor and Melee, and then she requested, "Please, send the others away." "No, they shall soon know," Han told her and smiled again to reassure her. "Let them see." Pluck shrunk, nervous and apprehensive of how they would react. No one besides Han, Fairah, and Edward had seen her beastly form. "Go on, child. You are among friends," Han said to coax her. For Han, she did, and Pluck lowered her hood, unclasped her cloak, and threw it on a nearby chair. She turned to Ardor and Melee and waited for their reactions. Ardor stumbled back and shouted, "By Fletching!" His face tightened in terror, and he instinctively went for his rapier. "Stow that sword!" Han commanded. Ardor reluctantly sheathed his blade, realizing this was Pluck's horrible secret. The Northern High Guard... his rival... was a beast and a frightful one at that with emerald eyes that pierced his soul, long white canines, a flowing fiery-crimson mane like a Fire Lion, and beige fur. Fur... He hated what he saw. This was no man, but a beast and an abomination that must be destroyed.

Chapter Fourteen

The Match

Pluck dared not breathe as Ardor drew his sword on her, and he started to attack her until Han stopped him. The tent closed in on her, trapping Pluck and she wanted to flee, but where could she go? Melee tilted his head. His reaction to Pluck was calmer than Han's Second as he exclaimed, "He's a woman." "What do you mean woman?" Ardor yelled. "Don't you see he's... it's a beast!" He paced the tent, gesturing angrily with his hands as he questioned, "How could you have kept this from me... your men? This..." He pointed at Pluck and said, "This abomination should never have been allowed to walk among us and yet it wears the High Guard insignia." He punched one of the large wooden poles holding up the tent, and his knuckles reddened from the impact as he cursed, "Fass! For all we know, Pluck's a Necrom." She bowed her head ashamed. Ardor reacted as she imagined. He hated her with a passion. "He's a woman," Melee repeated still stunned. "That's enough!" Han shouted as his face paled. He grew weaker, but he mustered the strength to glare at his Second and told him, "You know nothing." "He is right," Edward added in a gentler tone. "When we were children, I angered a witch. She would have vexed me if Pluck had not pushed me out of the way and taken the curse. Could you imagine me ruling as the thing you see?" Edward's words shocked Pluck. He also saw her as a monster. Edward must think her a horrible and ghastly thing to behold. No wonder he reacted as he did when she asked for the Kiss. The Prince continued, "You must understand, she saved the Fletching Kingdom, and I owe her a great debt." "And so do I," Han added. "We, the High Guards, were not there to protect the Prince, but Pluck a nine-seasons-old child was." He shivered as he held his side and glanced at the dark blood on his palm, and then he commanded, "I don't want you to disrespect her again. Am I clear?" Ardor's rage faded. Perhaps he was wrong... He remembered the stories his grandfather told him of the time before the Five Kingdoms and how the Necroms nearly destroyed man. Ardor searched Pluck's face and its beastly guise, and he saw only what he had been taught to despise. It was a Necrom. How could he forget? Ardor exploded with loathing as he yelled, "I'm not wrong! It's an abomination. Nothing you say or it does shall ever change my

mind!" Desperate for Han to see what he already knew, Ardor knelt beside Han and told him, "You are my commander, and I would die for you, but you have done us all a great dishonor. It's a mistake to have it here." He stood and warned him, "Wait until the Morgogs find out, and then you shall know hatred." Ardor turned from Han and said, "I am ashamed. I am greatly ashamed you took this Beast and taught it the High Guard way. I cannot be in here any longer." He stormed out, fearing he would spill blood if he stayed. Pluck turned to Edward, fighting back tears as she asked him, "Are you sure you can protect me? Your own men are against me." "Not all of us," Melee spoke up as he stepped forward. "It does not matter who or what you are. You are a High Guard, one trained by Han, and that makes you my brother... er... sister." He grabbed his hilt and swore to her, "You shall have my steel if you need it." She told him, "Thank you, the others won't be as kind." The ground shook, and Melee went to the tent entrance and told them, "The Dreadgons are back." Pluck turned to the Prince and said to him, "I'll be out soon. Could you give me a moment with Han?" Edward nodded and exited with Melee. She knelt at the commander's side and started, "There's so much I want to tell you and yet I don't know where to begin." She wiped her runny panther-nose and then continued, "You've been more than a mentor to me. You've been my father. I don't want to fail you, and I don't want to lose you. You're all I have." "Pluck, you must be strong. My life is near its end. Watch over Edward. Much danger lies ahead of him and please forgive Ardor. He feels betrayed but once he sees who you really are, he shall come around." He gripped her arm as he warned her, "Watch out for the Morgogs. They can be treacherous." Two High Guards walked in and waited by the entrance. They were shocked to see a Beast within, but they said nothing, seeing that Han spoke with it. "It is time," Han said. "Save our princess." Pluck kissed him on the cheek, stood, grabbed her cloak from the chair, unclasped her High Guard pin from it, and attached the charging Black Elk to her shirt. Pluck smoothed her hand over it as she said out loud to give herself courage, "If nothing else, I am a High Guard." She headed out, and the two soldiers gasped again but didn't say a word as she passed them. Her heart pounded as if it would burst through her chest. They knew a beast walked among them, and she could never take that back.

* * *

Edward walked from the tent to where the High Guards gathered. Parry, Sinew, Fracas, Bulwark, and Von were among them. Ardor stood off by himself. His face was red with anger and shame. Quip climbed a grouping of rocks to get a better view as Gar, Tusk, and the Dreadgons waited at the edge of the camp. Edward approached them with Melee. "Do you have a champion?" Gar asked. "Yes," Edward answered. The whole ordeal troubled Edward since so much depended on Pluck. Could she save his wife? Could he manage to give her the Kiss once she won? She was a horrible sight to behold and he didn't know if... He couldn't worry about that now... first, Pluck had to win. What would they do if she didn't? Avarice said he would make plans for their escape if Pluck failed, but Edward saw no such plans as he glanced around the camp. For Virago's sake, he hoped the plans were well hidden. "I, Gar, have selected a spot for our duel," he stated and then motioned for the Prince to follow, and Edward did as the Dreadgon walked to a grassy area not far from the camp. "This is where the match will take place." Virago and Flaxen watched from a distance. They and their escort walked to Han's tent as the group moved off to the grass. The Princess had to watch the fight that would determine her future. "Has it begun?" Virago asked as dread filled her heart. "I do not believe so," Flaxen answered. "I do not see the High Guard

champion." Pluck walked out, glanced at them, bowed, and spoke a greeting, "Princess Virago... Lady Flaxen..." She continued past them and stopped, watching those gathered in the circle. She grabbed her freed tail and stroked it apprehensively as she feared what would happen next. Pluck felt the stares of the Princess and her escort, knew the stress would only get worse, and dreaded making her appearance more than she feared to face the Dreadgon. She took a deep breath and headed for Gar. Her quick appearance out of the tent startled Virago and Flaxen. The Princess' guards drew their swords and surrounded the Princess. "Fires of Morgog!" one of the Sentinels shouted. "Did you see that?" Virago uttered as she grabbed Flaxen's arm. "A beast! And it spoke my name. What is it after?" Flaxen watched the creature with the mane of fiery-crimson as it walked through those gathered to face the Dreadgons, and then she exclaimed, "Oh, my..." "What is it?" Virago demanded. "I believe that creature... that hairy beast is our champion. See it wears the High Guard uniform," Flaxen told her as she noticed it had breasts. "And I do believe it is a female." Flaxen paused and then said, "If this is true, it is the one who requested the Kiss." "How dare it?" Virago declared as she made a disgusted face. "I believe I prefer Edward kissed a man. I believe I prefer he kissed a hundred men."

In the grassy area...

Gar glanced around those gathered and demanded, "Where is your warrior?" "I'm here," Pluck proclaimed. Morgogs and High Guards parted as they realized what was among them. The soldiers and sailors murmured, surprised and confused. "Phraggs! What is it?" a Fletching sailor asked. "Crell! It's a Necrom," a Morgog Footsoldier proclaimed. "We must destroy it!" "That thing has Pluck's sword," Parry said as he pointed out the weapon. "But where is he? Has it devoured him?" "I am here, Parry," she answered. "I have always been here." Pluck continued to the Dreadgons, and then she questioned Gar, "What are the rules of this match?" "Simple, the first one to yield loses." "What do you mean? It is not to the death?" Avarice spoke, and then he commented to his men, "It should be and then at least one filthy beast would die." The soldiers murmured their agreement. Avarice looked at Lord Caliber and then back to Pluck and the Dreadgon. The Morgog Commander whispered, "It seems you were right about the Dreadgons. They have revealed the magic one." Lord Caliber replied, "I knew I smelled sorcery. It is the enchantment of the Mystic Rose. Perhaps Pluck is the one the Mystic Rose bonded with and if so, we are one step closer to achieving our goals." He looked worried as he glanced at the Dreadgons, and then Lord Caliber said, "That is if she wins this match. We cannot allow the Dreadgons to take the Princess. Are your men in position if the Beast Woman should fail?" "Yes, everything is ready." Edward stepped toward the Dreadgons and asked them, "How do we know you shall keep your word and leave peacefully if we win?" "I, Gar, have given my word," he replied as he turned to his comrades. "If I should go against it, they will harshly deal with me." Gar faced Pluck and told her, "I have never faced a female of your kind in battle. This should make an interesting match." He smacked his spiked club on his palm and asked, "Are you ready?" Of her kind? Pluck looked over his monstrous gray form. His three sallow eyes peered at her, expressing his determination as drool frothed around his square lips and yellow tusks. He was a presence to fear. "Yes," Pluck answered and then unstrapped her scabbard. She unsheathed the Lux and thunder rumbled from the blade, warning those who would oppose it. She drew strength from its power, threw the scabbard aside, and then said, "Begin." Tusk and the other Dreadgons backed away as Gar twirled his club, loosening up. His hog-nose twitched with his zest to fight as

his wide bare chest bulged with muscles. He struck suddenly and with great force, slamming his spiked weapon upon her. Pluck lifted her sword and blocked his attack as his weight and strength bore down on her. Her arms shook under his pressure. Gar lifted his weapon and swung to bat her away, but Pluck ducked and rolled to the Dreadgon's feet. She struck at his unprotected ankles. He quickly lifted his leg, evading her attack, and then Gar smacked her with his free hand, sending her across the grass. She landed hard and slid. Pluck coughed on sand and dust, sat up, wiped her bloody lip, and stood. Gar laughed as he spoke, "Thought we were slow because of our size. You should never underestimate your opponent." He charged and slammed into her like a Desert Bull, and the force hurled her into the crowd of men, knocking several of them to the ground. Pluck rose to one knee, dazed, and looked around at those gathered. Many of them glared at her like they wished they were the ones trying to kill her. She dragged herself to her feet. "Do you yield?" Gar asked. "Surely you know you're outmatched. Give up now before you're hurt any further." He pointed his club at the men and told her, "I see how they stare at you. Why do you fight for their kind?" "Do not give up!" Edward pleaded. Pluck glanced at Princess Virago who had moved to the circle. The Princess and Flaxen cringed from her. What was she fighting for? Pluck had to remember or she would give up right there. She fought to end her curse and keep a promise to Han. She glanced around the circle and knew they would kill her if she lost, and Edward wouldn't be able to stop them. If she focused on that motive, then Pluck would be driven by fear. She focused on Han and the love she had for him and with new resolve, Pluck stuck her sword in the ground, removed her gloves, and kicked off her boots. She no longer needed them, and she may need her claws. Pluck drew the Lux from the sand and declared to the Dreadgon, "I will not yield!" She rushed upon him, leapt into the air, and came down on him with her sword. Gar lifted his club to block as the Lux flashed like lightning and then sliced through the wood. The spike-covered end of the weapon fell to the sand, and the Dreadgon stared at his club astonished. Pluck landed and slapped a palm down to absorb the force, and then she stood as her tail twitched with her eagerness to attack again. Gar threw what remained of his club at her. She quickly dodged it, rolled to her feet, and rushed upon him as he barreled his hand down on her. She evaded and sliced her sword across his ankle. Gar howled, then brought his other hand down, and smashed her, and the force nearly knocked her out. She laid there motionless on the sand as Gar stumbled back from his injury. Tusk stepped up and supported his comrade. "Do you yield?" he asked through gritted teeth as green blood trickled down his ankle. She didn't reply. "Do you yield?" he asked again as he hobbled on one foot. Pluck moved her left hand from underneath her belly, swiped it across the sand, and felt how warm the granules were under the sun. She sucked in needed air which made her side hurt and with intense pain, Pluck pushed off the ground, used her sword as a crutch, and rose to one knee. Red blood ran from her eyes and mouth. Her vision blurred as she scanned the crowd. Most of their faces hadn't changed except for Virago and Lady Flaxen. They realized if she lost the duel then the Princess would be taken. "Do not give up," Flaxen pleaded for her Princess. Pluck turned to Edward and saw his eyes were filled with concern, but it wasn't for her. It hurt Pluck to see that his regard was only for his wife, and it hurt her worse than the pain stabbing at her body. She was ready to give up and yield when she heard a voice. "Pluck..." She turned and saw two High Guards carry Han out on his cot. Her self-pity melted away as she saw the man she considered her father come out to her. The two High Guards gently set him down as Han urged her, "Pluck... Fight... You cannot give up." Her self-pity turned to love intermixed with bitter sorrow. Tears

streamed down her face as she cried for her pain and the pain that Han endured to come out to her. She knew he loved her and that love gave her strength to stand. Pluck unsteadily rose to her feet as she yelled, "I will not yield! Never!" "Can you go on?" Tusk asked Gar as he looked at his injured foot. "Yes, just remind me what I'm fighting for." "Look," Tusk told him as he motioned to the Princess. "You're fighting for that fair one. She'll be our cook and clean for us. No more eating raw or boiled eggs for surely she knows many recipes." Gar licked his lips as he said, "Let me see if I can stand on my own. I can." Tusk handed him a new club, but he refused it as Gar reminded him, "No, only what we bring to the match." He hobbled toward the Beast Woman as he mopped sweat from his massive hairy forearms and hunched back with his hand. He flexed his muscles and made fists as he warned her, "These are like hammers. I may not have a club, but I can still kill you." Pluck didn't reply as she wiped the blood from her mouth. She stared at the Dreadgon with her emerald feline eyes and bolted for him. Gar didn't expect such speed. He swung his fist and the other and missed her as Pluck climbed up his leg and around on his back. She grabbed his ear and placed her sword under his chin. The blade cut into his thick gray skin and green blood trickled down. "Do you yield?" she asked, affirming her hold on him. "Crell!" Gar shouted, and then he answered, "Yes. You have won. We'll leave." She released him and slid to the ground and nearly collapsed to her feet. She took a few moments to rest, and Pluck felt a little stronger and wasn't as wobbly on her legs. Gar hobbled off with Tusk's assistance and the other Dreadgons followed. Tusk told Gar, "This means we'll have no cook." "Yes, I know," Gar answered. "This means we'll only have boiled eggs." "Actually," Gar corrected him, "We'll have nothing. You've forgotten these creatures ate our eggs." Virago rushed over to Edward and questioned him, "Is it over?" He embraced her as he told her, "Yes, my love. You are safe." Once the Dreadgons vanished into the jungle, Avarice looked at Lord Caliber and then stormed into the circle as if on cue and began his performance. He inquired, "What is the meaning of this? Has a Beast walked among us this whole time?" "It is a Necrom," Lord Caliber declared as he accusingly pointed his staff at her. "We all know the story of the Second Age of Magic and how the Necroms nearly destroyed Man. Our forefathers told us if the Necroms ever found our new home they must be destroyed or they would destroy us." Many from both sides murmured, agreeing with Avarice and Lord Caliber. Pluck said nothing in her defense as she looked at Edward and saw his face hardened with contemplation. She feared he would leave her to the wolves of mistrust and hatred, and Pluck feared he would betray her. A voice rose above the others when it seemed no one would come to her aid. "Would you murder our hero?" Han asked. "Would you slay the one who just saved our princess from untold horrors?" The men grew silent as they all considered the Fletching Commander's words. "Pluck is not a Necrom. She is like us only cursed," Han informed them, and then he coughed up more blood in his hand. He wouldn't let that stop him, and he ordered, "All of you back to your work. There is still much to do." The Fletching people moved off as Avarice nodded and the Morgogs departed. Edward and Virago left the circle, making their way to his tent. Flaxen followed them and Melee paused from following his prince as Pluck walked to the Fletching Commander. Han praised her as he said, "Well done. Come, let someone tend to your wounds." No one volunteered so Melee stepped forward and said, "I will tend to Pluck if someone will man my station." Han nodded and ordered a High Guard to take Melee's place. Lord Caliber and Avarice moved toward their tent, and Lord Caliber drew close and whispered, "I saw her fingers. Pluck bears the marks of the Mystic Rose." Avarice stated, "Then that part of our mission is completed." He stopped, studied the crowd, and headed into his tent

along with Lord Caliber as he added, "Soon we shall begin the next phase and after Han is dead, I see no one who shall hinder us." Back near the grassy area, Quip climbed down from the rocks as he muttered to himself, "Me not like people's stares and since Pluck not wear cloak, people hate." He scampered over into an empty hole he'd made his nest and grabbed his sack. "Me think time me left. Bad mood here." He scurried into the jungle as he muttered, "No good come."

Chapter Fifteen

The Kiss

Han called many into his tent for his final hour. Pluck stayed to the back as Melee cleaned and applied ointment to her cuts and scrapes. The Lux, which had proven itself as an invaluable weapon, leaned on a crate beside her. The High Guards stayed clear of her and only Ardor and Fracas glanced at her, Ardor with a hate-filled stare, and Fracas with a bewildered look. The Second turned from her, disgusted and knelt by his commander. Han tried to clear his dry throat, and then one of his men gave him water. Han drank and then began, "I have asked all of you here to bear witness." All color had gone from his face, and his voice was weak as he continued, "My time's short so I must appoint another to take my place." He struggled to breathe but pressed on. "One worthy of your leadership." He searched the faces of those standing around him and then ordered, "Pluck, come forward." Ardor angrily glanced at the Beast Woman. Han couldn't. He couldn't place it in charge! Pluck knelt by Han's side next to his Second, sensing Ardor's glare. The sand was dry and cool beneath her but not cold enough to quench the hate bearing down on her. Pluck scratched her cat-ear. She couldn't see herself taking command. It would be too much. She pleaded within her heart for Han not to put such a burden on her. "Pluck," Han started, placing his hand on her shoulder. "I place you second in command to Ardor who shall lead my men. This is my wish and one I beg all of you to honor." No one dared grumble their disdain. Pluck sighed, relieved for she couldn't endure any more pressure. She looked into Han's face as life slipped from his shaky grasp. Pluck turned her gaze to the floor. He couldn't leave her, not alone and not at this time when so many hated her. It was too much for her to bear. Ardor noticed the Beast's relief but that didn't change his opinion of it. Han continued, "My Second." He waited for Ardor to look at him and in great pain, Han continued, "There is no one else I would have take charge of my High Guards. I know you shall be a great leader." He gasped for air, struggling to finish. "Heed Pluck's advice as I heeded yours. This is my wish that you put aside superstition and hatred and judge the actions and the heart of this woman before you." Han raised his voice and told them, "This is my wish for all the High Guards." Ardor yelled at him, "You can't... you cannot appoint this beast as my Second!" Han didn't answer for a long time. Why couldn't Ardor get past the bigotry of his fathers? Han told him, "I can and I have. There are witnesses, and the Creator has heard my voice." He closed his eyes and opened them, face full of anguish. "These are my wishes. Abide by them." Han stared at Ardor and Pluck. They were now the hope of Fletching. He let out a great sigh and his chest rose no more. "No! Change your wishes. Make another my Second," Ardor shouted as he shook Han, but his commander didn't move as his eyes glazed over. "NO!" Ardor yelled. "Don't die! Don't leave things like this." Pluck lifted her head as tears

streamed down her furry face. She couldn't believe he'd passed on. Han lived life to its fullest and now he was an empty shell. "Goodbye my friend... my father," she whispered as her lip quivered, and then she wiped her eyes. A great rift formed long ago between her and the world. It was one Han had bridged, but with him gone... Who would keep her connected to humanity? She looked at Ardor as he wept on the commander's chest. Pluck knew it didn't matter what she said to him. Ardor would always hate her. Why did Han put her in second command? Why did he leave her alone to face the people's hatred? She kissed her mentor's hand, stood, and walked out of the tent as the High Guards paid their respects. Everything around her felt unreal like none of it was happening. The background blurred in her mind as did the glares of the men. She looked at her fur-covered hands. Pluck was tired of her beast form, and it was time Edward honored his pledge and gave her the Kiss. She glanced at Han's tent as she couldn't stand knowing that animosity surrounded her and that no place was safe. Pluck grabbed her tail and stroked it. The only one who loved her in her cursed form was dead, and she feared she would die too if she didn't return to normal. Pluck walked up to Edward's tent, and two men stood guard without. One was a High Guard and the other a Morgog. She passed them and went into the tent and found no one within the first section. Many emotions swirled around in her as she made her way to where Edward would be. He would give her the Kiss and release her from this accursed form and once that happened, there would be no more stares and no more glares of hatred. She would be a woman and everyone would accept her and one day someone would love her. Pluck went into the next section and as she stepped through the next tent flap she started, "Edward, I..." She gasped as a horribly unfathomable sight knocked her back as if a dozen arrows struck her chest. In the third section and on the Prince's bed, Edward and Virago passionately kissed. The jolt to Pluck's psyche knocked her back, and she couldn't utter a word. Edward had... her redemption... It couldn't be! The one thing Edward promised to her twice now and what would have freed her from her curse he gave carelessly to his wife as if Pluck meant nothing to him. It felt as though Edward thrust a sword through her heart and twisted it further in with each new embrace of his wife's lips. Virago had stolen her one and only hope, and Pluck would remain the Beast forever. She felt sick to the point of dying, and Pluck wanted to shriek at them. Edward finally noticed her once he surfaced from his wife's warm and seductive embrace, and he uttered, "Pluck!" He sat up, realizing what he had done and stammered, "I... I..." Pluck stood there as if chains bound her to that hellacious place and that horrid moment. Her life was over and there was nothing that would save her from her accursed fate. Why did Edward do it? Why did he give her redemption to another? She had to act. She had to take her revenge. Pluck had to do something because of the injustice inflicted upon her. What should she do? What should she do to them?

The End

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